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LOCAL POLITICS IN BENGAL:

MIDNAPUR DISTRICT 1907-1934

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Abstract

This thesis studies the development and social character of Indian nationalism in the Midnapur district of Bengal.

It begins by showing the Government of Bengal in 1907 in a deepening political crisis. The structural imbalances caused by the policy of active intervention in the localities could not be offset by the 'paternalistic' and personalised district administration. In Midnapur, the situation was compounded by the inability of government to secure its traditional political base based on zamindars. Real power in the countryside lay in the hands of petty landlords and intermediaries who consolidated their hold in the economic environment of growing commercialisation in agriculture. This was reinforced by a caste movement of the Mahishyas which injected the district with its own version of 'peasant-pride'.

The thesis also argues that till 1921, the nationalist movement failed to involve the rural activists. Urban and rural political activity developed autonomously and without mutual reference.

The radical change in nationalist politics in 1921 enabled some politicians to make the connection between these two currents. During the Non Co-operation movement, Midnapur witnessed a successful movement against additional rural taxation.

It has also been contended that after 1922 the district Congress consciously strove to articulate the interests of 'well-to-do cultivators', especially the jotedars and tenure-holding ryots, and established its political hegemony on that basis. This was put to the test during the Civil Disobedience movement, when Midnapur, almost alone in all Bengal, was able to put up a formidable challenge to British rule.

The thesis concludes that given the seemingly 'non-antagonistic' strategy employed by Congress in its relations with indigenous society, the social character of the nationalist movement was determined by the existing hierarchical patterns of class domination. In Midnapur, this found expression in the aggressive, but ideologically conservative, movement of the rural rich led by the intermediary jotedars.

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Abbreviations

ADM	Additional District Magistrate.
AICC	All India Congress Committee
BLC	Bengal Legislative Council
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
BVSG	Bengal Village Self Government Act
DB	District Board
DCC	District Congress Committee
DCR	Report of the Royal Commission on Decentralisation
DM	District Magistrate
EPW	Economic and Political Weekly
GOB	Government of Bengal
GOI	Government of India
H.Poll	Home Political
IESHR	Indian Economic and Social History Review
IOL	India Office Library, London
LSG	Local Self Government
MAS	Modern Asian Studies
MLC	Member of Legislative Council
MRR	Midnapur Records Room, Midnapur Collectorate, Midnapur
MZC	Midnapur Zamindari Company
NAI	National Archives of India, New Delhi
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi
PCC	Pradesh Congress Committee
Progs	Proceedings
PWD	Public Works Department
Rev-Gen	Revenue-General
SDO	Subdivisional Officer
SP	Superintendant of Police
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta

Introduction

"(W)hose freedom are we particularly striving for, for nationalism covers many sins and includes many conflicting elements?"[1] More than three decades after India kept her initial 'tryst with destiny' this problem posed by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1933 remains unambiguously unanswered. Perhaps the problem lies in the phenomenon of nationalism itself, which as historians have discovered, constitutes an enigma. Though in the colonial world nationalism has generally been equated with the struggle against European domination, the political identities of the various nationalist movements have been by no means uniform. In Asia for example, there was little similarity between the Vietnamese nationalism of Ho Chi Minh on one hand, and the non-violent Gandhian nationalism on the other. The phenomenon of nationalism as such, defies definition, except in the most general sense. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm, "Nationalism has been a great puzzle..., not only because it is both powerful and devoid of any discernable rational theory but also because its shape and functions are constantly changing. Like the cloud with which Hamlet taunted Polonius, it can be interpreted according to taste as a camel, a weasel or a whale, though it is none of these"[2]

Notwithstanding these obvious hazards, historians, ever since the process of decolonisation began, have increasingly focused their attention on the problem of nationalism, whether as a separate entity, or as an element of overall 'politics'. There is a general recognition that barring radical discontinuities, the course of politics in the Third World after 'independence' have been determined considerably by the nature and social character of their various nationalisms. In India, the nature and course of post independence political and economic development has been determined by the political legacy of the freedom struggle coupled with later structural changes in society. It is for these reasons that the study of Indian nationalism has acquired a direct contemporary relevance. This thesis charts the particular course and political identity of Indian nationalism as it existed in Midnapur, a district in South-West Bengal.

1. Quoted in Gyanendra Pandey, 'Review Article', IESHR, XI, 2-3 1974, p.328.
2. E. Hobsbawm, 'Some Reflections on 'The Break-Up of Britain', New Left Review, 105, 1977, p.3.

Bengal has received some attention from historians by virtue of being a birth-place of modern nationalism in India. Anil Seal argued that it was the frustrations caused by the diminishing opportunities within the colonial state that channelled the energies of the educated Bengali in the direction of nationalism.[3] Indian nationalism was therefore "born in frustrated bastardy out of the miscegnation of imperial education and the diverse forces of elitism and social factionalism"[4]. John Broomfield, like Seal, emphasised the elitist character of bhadrolok-dominated Bengali nationalist politics, especially the growing estrangement with the substantial Muslim population in East Bengal.[5] In an attempt to rehabilitate the bhadrolok, Sumit Sarkar placed them in the category of Gramsci's concept of 'traditional intellectuals', displaced from their immediate class backgrounds and responsive to intellectual currents, nationally and internationally. He used Trotsky's notion of 'substitutionism' to demonstrate that the bhadrolok were acting as a proxy for yet-unresponsive social classes - the national bourgeoisie and the peasantry.[6]

The manoeuvres and idiosyncracies of the Bengali Hindu politician were also the chief concern of John Gallagher.[7] Using Seal's model of government intervention as providing the main impetus to the development of nationalist reaction, he argued that Congress in Bengal was overwhelmingly based in Calcutta. As a result it was unable to benefit from the extension of franchise and the establishment of Union Boards and other organs of local self-government. The Congress leadership consequently lacked any real base in the districts and consciously strove to keep real power in the hands of their narrow upper-caste clique. "When B.N.Sasmal became Secretary of the PCC in 1927, the combined efforts of the four Calcutta DCC's quickly pushed him out of office; not only was he an up-country man from Midnapore, he was also a Mahishya. The true heirs of Das were more presentable men, such as Subhas Bose, J.M.Sen Gupta, K.S. Roy (all three educated at Oxford or Cambridge), Anil Baran Ray and P.C.Guha Roy".[8] In 1933, the government introduced the Communal

3. Anil Seal, The Emergence of Indian Nationalism, Cambridge 1971.
4. Barun De, 'Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian Freedom Struggle', Indian Historical Review, II, 1, 1975, p.391.
5. J.H.Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society, Berkeley 1968. Marcus Franda, Radical Politics in West Bengal, Cambridge Mass 1971, argues that even the Marxist movements maintain the continuity of elitist bhadrolok politics.

Award and the Congress was permanently assigned to the opposition benches. It was able to recover its hegemony in Bengali politics only after the partition of 1947.

Rajat Ray's works were a complete departure from this obsession with elite politics. Analysing the power structure in rural Bengal, Ray demolished a long-standing myth that the British conquest and the Permanent Settlement had revolutionised rural Bengal. He distinguished between the zamindars, who had control over revenue, and the jotedars who had real control over land.[9] He saw nationalism as the movement which in rural areas, articulated the assertiveness of what D. A. Low described as the 'dominant peasants'[10], born "primarily from the internal dynamics of social conflict triggered off by colonial economic and institutional changes"[11] The Indian nationalist movement was therefore, a "broad political alliance between urban and rural intermediate elements whose roots went back to the pre-colonial social and political system in India"[12]

It is against the background of this historiography that this thesis is undertaken. It seeks to examine the dynamics of politics (especially nationalist politics) in a predominantly rural district of Bengal that won some notoriety and acclaim for its effective participation in the Gandhian movements. Methodologically, the work is largely inspired by the Marxist analysis of political behaviour, especially that stream of Marxist tradition that has come to be characterised as 'classical Marxism'[13] Large sections of the discussion are centred within this 'problematic'.

Chapter 2 discusses the role of government and institutional politics in Midnapur in the two decades prior to the Government of India Act of 1919. The topic is examined in the context of the contention by the so-called 'Cambridge School' of historians that government initiatives, especially in the arena of local self-government, opened up the process

6. Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-8, Delhi 1973, pp. 513-4. Paradoxically, Trotsky used the term to warn against the Party substituting itself for the working class, cf. Duncan Hallas, Trotsky's Marxism, London 1979, p.77.
7. John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930-39' in Gallagher, Johnson, Seal, ed. Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870-1970, Cambridge 1973.
8. Ibid, pp. 276-7.
9. Rajat and Ratna Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal', MAS, XI, 1, 1975 and 'The Dynamics of Continuity in Rural Bengal Under the British Imperium' IESHR X,2,1973.

of politicisation.[14] The chapter examines the structure of local government at all levels in Midnapur, especially the role of District and Local Boards and Union Committees and the extent of participation therein. It poses the question: to what extent had the Raj succeeded in legitimising its alien rule by incorporating a network of local 'collaborators'. In short, what was the political basis of British rule in Midnapur?

Since Midnapur was a predominantly rural district and agriculture was the major source of livelihood of the people, Chapter 3 looks at the structure and pattern of landholding. To what extent did the juridical categories of landholding reflect the real pattern of rural power? The chapter examines briefly the pattern of rent, credit and marketing, and attempts to relate this to the indigenous power structure in the localities.

A notable feature of Midnapur was the numerical preponderance of the Mahishya caste. Chapter 3 also examines the sudden upsurge in caste consciousness in the wake of the Census operation. It examines the direction of the Mahishya caste movement in Bengal and its underlying political content. What effect did this caste movement have on the pattern of rural control in the district?

Chapter 4 studies the political life of Midnapur between 1907 and 1918. The emphasis here is placed on that aspect of politics which existed outside the orbit of institutional politics. Four political 'movements' are singled out for close scrutiny. Emphasis is placed on discovering the connections (if any) between the intelligentsia in the urban enclaves and the rural activists. How far had non institutional politics in this period laid the basis for the emergence of the Gandhian movement in 1921?

10. D. A. Low, Congress and The Raj: Facets of Indian Struggle 1917-47, London 1977, p.2.
11. Rajat Ray, 'Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1908' unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Cambridge, 1972, p.322.
12. Rajat Ray, 'Political Change in British India', IESHR, XIV, 4, 1977, p.509.
13. cf. Perry Anderson, Considerations on Western Marxism, London 1976.
14. Article by Anil Seal in Gallagher, Johnson, Seal, ed, op.cit, pp.1-27.

Chapter 5 is divided into three sections. The first section analyses the elections to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1920, the first after the 1919 Act. It looks at the personalities involved in the elections and the issues raised before the electorate, and poses the question whether the introduction of reforms per se had brought a qualitative shift in the nature of politics in Midnapur. The second section considers the process of the non-cooperation movement concentrating on the Union Board agitation in southern Midnapur. Since this movement had a considerable impact, the chapter attempts to discover the political basis of the movement and locate the interests which it articulated. The last section is devoted to a study of an agitation peripheral to the mainstream of the non-cooperation, but one which presents a contrast to the Union Board issue.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the period of Congress participation in the Dyarchy system of government. The extension of franchise under the new scheme is studied and this is related to the existing pattern of rural power. Examined secondly is the nature of the organised Congress intervention within the structures of local self-government notably the District Board. The Congress organisation in Midnapur and its intervention in politics are analysed with particular emphasis on their social basis and class character. Was the Congress merely a 'ramshackle coalition' based on the immediate peculiarities of 'factional' politics, or did it possess a definite class base? The discussion is conducted with special reference to the passage of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1928. Lastly, the political process in Midnapur is related to the pattern of regional politics in Bengal. In particular, the chapter focusses on the relationship of the Bengal Congress with the local Congress. Was the Congress organisation in Midnapur merely an appendage to the leadership in Calcutta or did it have an independent base? In examining these questions, attempt has been made to explain the social character of nationalist politics, as it existed in one district.

The Civil Disobedience Movement is the theme of Chapter 7. The various phases of the movement are examined in some detail with special emphasis on the mechanics of mass mobilisation. But, in particular, through an examination of the ideological content of the movement and the social character of the leadership, the chapter examines the

contention that movements such as the one in Midnapur objectively threatened the political hegemony of the national bourgeoisie in the nationalist movement.[15] Was Midnapur a deviation from the logic of Gandhian nationalism?

The Conclusion (Chapter 8) rounds off the discussion in the preceding chapters. In the main, it attempts to relate the pattern of Midnapur politics to the mainstream of Bengali and national Congress politics. It focusses on the nature of the political identity in the district and the factors that led to its distinctive form. Moreover, in the light of the orthodox Indian 'left' view of rural politics or what Eric Stokes called the 'Punch and Judy' viewpoint,[16] it investigates the specificities of the class dimension in Midnapur politics, especially the implications of those strategies for radical change which stress the necessity "to unite all the peasants, from the agricultural worker to the rich peasant"[17] The thesis argues that the specific example of the Midnapur experience might serve as a pointer to the improbability and the antagonistic class nature of such a 'peasant' bloc.

15. This is the claim advanced by Sumit Sarkar, 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism: Civil Disobedience and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact', Indian Historical Review, III, 1, 1976.
16. Eric Stokes 'Jawaharlal Nehru in the Making', MAS, XI, 2, 1977, p.297.
17. Interview with Harkishan Singh Surjeet, Member of Politbureau, Communist Party of India-Marxist, Problems of Communism, Summer 1977.

GOVERNMENT IN MIDNAPUR 1907 - 1920

By the turn of the 20th Century, the administration of Bengal was posing a few headaches for British administrators. Calcutta, besides being the capital of the Raj, was also the administrative centre of the province of Bengal - a huge unwieldy province of 189,000 square miles and a population of 78.5 million. Though Lieutenant Governor Bourdillon claimed in 1903 that "we are proud of the burden and of the importance and magnitude of our province, and do not shrink from labour" [1], officials often complained of the 'excessive burden' which the sheer size of the province imposed on them.[2] Lord Curzon who recognised the problem, attempted to meet it by partitioning Bengal in 1905, although this was not dictated by considerations of administrative expediency alone. Yet, while sheer size contributed significantly to the development of administrative bottlenecks, it was only part of the story. The administrative structures of the Raj at the turn of the century corresponded to the political needs of the pre-1857 days. Then, the smooth collection of the agricultural surplus coupled with the maintenance of law and order had been hoped to provide the necessary climate for British entrepreneurs to expand their markets. It was possible to run extensive districts with a vigilant Divisional Commissioner, an enlightened Collector aided by inexperienced Subdivisional Officers and experienced Bengali clerks, a handful of policemen and chaukidars, and distant familiarity with local notables.

The turmoil of 1857 altered the picture fundamentally. To balance its books and maintain political control effectively, the Raj was compelled to abandon its relatively passive role in government and intervene more actively in the affairs of the localities.[3] Since alternative sources of revenue had to be found and tapped without causing political turmoil, there was the need to search out and accommodate more Indians in the

1. Bourdillon to Curzon 21st June 1903, quoted in Sumit Sarkar The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903 - 1908, Delhi 1973, p.13.
2. Resolution No. 3678, 3rd December 1903, quoted in Sumit Sarkar, op. cit, p.12.
3. This argument is well set out by A. Seal, 'Imperialism and Nationalism in India', M.A.S., V11,3,1973 and C. A. Bayly The Local Roots of Indian Politics - Allahabad 1880 - 1920, Oxford 1975, pp. 1-18.

institutional structures of British rule. The Famine Code, the Survey of Settlement operations, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, and Ripon's Local Self Government Act were some of the measures adopted to make government more 'efficient' and which defined political arenas for intervention. Curzon, on his part, reactivated moribund departments and emphasised the role of the state (albeit in a limited way) in development endeavours within the colonial framework. This shift in government orientation also required a corresponding shift in the machinery of government, but this was not forthcoming.

In Bengal, the partition of the province in 1905 was genuinely seen by a section of the administration as paving the way to greater efficiency. But partition merely split the province into two, and its sole effect, in terms of administration, was to reduce the burden of paperwork among officials and clerks in Writer's Building by transferring it to a new set of officials in Dacca. The move involved no qualitative change in the administrative set-up. Indeed, the roots of the problem lay not in the provincial centre at Calcutta or Dacca, but lower down in the administrative rung. It is in the arena of the districts, sub-divisions and thanas that we must look to for any analyses of the crises that engulfed the Raj in Bengal during the 20th century.

District Administration in Midnapur

> The power and duties of the Collector embrace almost every subject which comes within the functions of modern government.[4]

This generalisation by the Royal Commission on Agriculture, was a fair description of government as it existed in Midnapur before 1922. The Collector was the central figure around whom district administration revolved:

> He was the head of everything...He was the moving and regulating spirit in the whole vast and complicated human machine which we call the Administration.[5]

The Collector was assisted by his Subdivisional Officers and an Additional District Magistrate, first appointed in 1907[6], to relieve

4. Quoted in D. A. Washbrook The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency 1870 - 1920, Cambridge 1976, p.27.
5. R. Carstairs The Little World of An Indian District Officer, London 1912, pp. 46-47.
6. Bengal Political Progs. December 1911, No. 23-26.

him of some juridical duties; all these appointments were made from the I.C.S. Also aiding the Collector were the various Deputy Collectors, Sub-Deputy Collectors, the District Engineer, and a band of lesser officials, mostly Indian. The Police, 944 strong, occupied a special position not only as keepers of the peace, but as 'local officers of the government'[7]. This was necessary as the subdivisional officers had no staff of their own and were compelled to use the police as gatherers of all local information.

Certain local peculiarities made the task of governing Midnapur especially complex. The first of these was the unusually high proportion of Khas Mahals or government estates, especially in Contai, from which alone the government derived an annual income of Rs 5,262,401 in 1912[8]. The Khas Mahals were managed by a total of 18 officers, 10 of whom were stationed at district headquarters and only 3 in Contai. The Subdivisional Officers supervised the work of the Khas Mahals managers, but the returns were screened by the Collector. This latter task did not appear to be a mere formality, and E. H. Walsh, the Divisional Commissioner in 1905 claimed that Khas Mahal work took up at least one fourth of the Collectors time[9]. Nor was the burden merely confined to paper work. Government regulations made it obligatory for the Collector to inspect Khas Mahal offices at regular intervals and decide appeals in certificate cases. Non-official opinion accused Collectors of shirking this aspect of administration and claimed that Khas Mahal work took up only a week's time per year of the Collector[10]. There was some truth in this accusation. The work of the Subdivisional Officers, usually fresh I.C.S. recruits, who did not have much idea of the intricacies of the revenue system and were thus totally dependent on the guidance of experienced Indian subordinates. Most of the work of the Collector consisted in straightening out irregularities that occurred in spite of this.

7. Royal Commission upon Decentralisation 1909 (Hobhouse Commission) Cmd 4360, Vol. 4, para 14395. Evidence of E. A. Gait. (Hereafter referred to as DCR)
8. Bengal Political Progs. October 1912.
9. E. H. Walsh to Chief Secy. GOB 16th March 1905, General V11/56/1905-6 (MRR).
10. Medini Bandhab 4th August, 1913, RNP Bengal 16th August 1913.

The supervision of the elaborate system of Khals (canals) and embankments added to the problems of district administration. Being a coastal area, Midnapur was particularly susceptible to the vagaries of nature. Between 1823 and 1874, there occurred 8 severe cyclonic storms causing immense loss of life and property. To meet this threat, government built and maintained a great sea-dyke; government also maintained Khals with sluices for the drainage of the Madhur Mahals - agricultural land close to the sea. However, it was the embankments which attracted the greatest attention from the government. They were the most significant factors in the economies of the Jalamutha, Majnamutha and other low-lying temporarily-settled government estates. Although the embankments dated back to pre-East India Company days, it was only after two big floods in 1864 and 1874 that government gave any serious attention to their maintenance; the motive was to preserve the economic livelihood of two of the most lucrative Khas Mahals[11].

On paper at least, the administration of the dykes, Khals, and embankments was entrusted to the Public Works Department with the Executive Engineer of the Cossye Division playing the leading role[12]. However, the frequency of floods in the district resulting from breaches in embankments meant that the Collector could not entrust the entire responsibility to the Executive Engineer or the P.W.D. An entire section of the peasantry whose livelihood was dependent on the efficient functioning of the P.W.D. evinced a keen interest in the running of the department. In 1913, when floods affected the whole of Contai, the demand went up for the government to implement a long abandoned scheme costing Rs 21 lakhs which would entail the construction of irrigation canals with a broad channel falling into the Kaligha river, and with feeder canals protected by embankments[13]. In 1920, after Contai and Tamluk were flooded, the Congress leader B. N. Sasmal claimed that this was due to the want of repairs to the Khoja and Bhograi embankments, both under the charge of the P.W.D.[14]. In 1922 when the Ghatal Circuit Embankment was breached:

11. Ramapada Chatterji Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of the Government and the Temporarily Settled Estates in the District of Midnapore 1903 - 11, Calcutta 1912, pp. 3-5.
12. Ibid, p.3.
13. Bengalee 28th September 1913, RNP Bengal 4th October, 1913.
14. Dainik Basumati 15th August 1920, RNP Bengal 21st August 1920. Ibid 24th August 1920, RNP Bengal 4th September 1920.

> ... the universal feeling was that Government was responsible for the conditions of the subdivision owing to the Embankment policy which had been pursued in the past, and that it was the duty of Government to repair the breaches at once and put things right as far as possible[15].

In an atmosphere where the government agencies had the task of regulating the waters of Midnapur, but did not or could not for lack of efficiency or finance, the work of the P.W.D. was inevitably politicised, calling for the intervention of the Collector. It was the Collector and not the Engineer who had to recommend the course of an embankment to the higher authorities after weighing the mood of the district and the financial resources of government.

The tauzi system of revenue collection, peculiar to Bengal, further contributed to the centralisation of district administration. This system demanded the direct payment of land revenue to the Collector at district headquarters. Again, the Collector alone was authorised to take coercive action in case of default[16]. The system was popular with the larger zamindars, especially those with land in more than one subdivision. In Midnapur, where the government held more than 200 estates, it reduced the number of personnel required for revenue collection. It also enabled the government to assemble all the various land revenue 'experts' in the Collectorate to sort out the intricacies of the revenue system. But the disadvantages of the system far outweighed its benefits. Though the minor revenue officials prepared the groundwork for the Collectorate officials, the paper work at headquarters was increased substantially. The mobility of the Collector, the key figure in administration, was severely reduced. At a time when government was making concerted attempts to increase efficiency, and given that district administration was highly personalised, the tauzi system contributed significantly to administrative bottlenecks. More important, from the political point of view, this rigid centralisation removed one of the main areas of government from the grass-roots and made government itself very remote from the majority of the population[17].

15. Collector to Commissioner 27th February 1925, Rev-Gen X/21/1925 (MRR).
16. Report of the District Administration Committee 1913 - 14 Calcutta 1915 p.31.
17. Rajat Ray - Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal Unpublished Ph.D. thesis Cambridge University 1972 p.321.

Centralisation seems to have pervaded all aspects of district administration. Examination of the Collectorate records reveal that the Collector was personally involved to an extraordinary extent in routine administrative tasks, for example in the voluminous correspondence over the acquisition of land for a police station, the construction of a dak bungalow, or the annual returns for the Poisons Act. In 1920, the district administrators decreed that "No more temporary or permanent vacancies in the cadre of peons shall be filled up and no additional peons should be employed without the previous permission of the Commissioner"[18] Nor did the administrators in Calcutta help matters. In 1917, the Accountant General sanctioned the opening of a personal ledger in the district treasury to credit all receipts in connection with chaukidari uniforms[19]. These actions were almost inevitable traits in a colonial regime, and showed the unmistakable signs of political nervousness.

Communications within the district impeded administrative efficiency too. Roads were few and in severe need of repairs. At the turn of the century an official wrote about Midnapur:

> I drew on the map with a pair of compasses a circle enclosing 300 square miles thickly populated and all rate paying, in which there was not a yard of District road[20].

According to the returns for 1907 - 1908, the District Board maintained 384½ miles of metalled roads and 358 miles of unmetalled roads. There were also a number of village tracks with an aggregate length of 756 miles, which were managed by Local Boards and Union Committees[21]. By 1921 things had improved marginally, and total mileage of all roads amounted to 1,498 miles[22]. Major areas of the district were connected by rail, but not the coastal regions of Tamluk and Contai where

18. Revised Instructions for Dafadars and Chaukidars. 24th June 1920, Jud-Gen V1/5/1920. (MRR).
19. Jud-Gen V/1-a/1917-18 (MRR).
20. R. Carstairs op. cit. pp. 196-7.
21. Midnapore District Gazetteer p. 132.
22. BLC Progs. 1/5/1921 p.321.

communications were difficult. Nor were all the rivers bridged, and movement of goods and people depended to a considerable extent on ferries, not all of which were safe. There were, for example, frequent boat disasters at Petuaghat where people crossed to the Sūnderbans. There were telegraph offices at only 12 places[23], and only 41 of the 145 chaukidari unions possessed post offices[24]. It seems extraordinary that a government committed to increasing efficiency did not invest in the essential infrastructure that was a precondition of progress. The Raj showed all the characteristics of a regime working for the interests of profit not the needs of the people.

The Sadar subdivision too, was rather unwieldy in size, comprising 3271 square miles and embracing 12 thanas. The Sadar area included the Jungle Mahals around Jhargram, Gidni and Gopiballavpur mainly inhabited by Santhals and other tribals. This area, with infertile soil and a particularly exploitative zamindari run by the Managing Agency of Andrew Yule, was economically backward enough to merit some special attention and generous grants from government, none of which was forthcoming[25]. In 1903, the Government of Bengal communicated to the Commissioner "... That the Sadar subdivision of Midnapore both on account of its area and population is too large to be effectively supervised as a sub-division"[26] But the decision took an incredibly long time to implement. It was only in 1922, after railways had made land valuable in Jhargram and the Santhals had joined in the non co-operation movement of 1921, that government finally created the new subdivision of Jhargram comprising the thanas of Jhargram, Binpur, Gopiballavpur and Nayagram[27].

In Bengal, more than anywhere else in India, it was the law that was instrumental in regulating and keeping in check the stresses and strains in society. Colonial government was remarkable successful in imposing upon a largely pre-capitalist society the ideological hegemony of its legal institutions. This was due in part to the absence or weakness of indigenous village-based or caste-based

23. Midnapore District Gazetteer, B.Volume p.38
24. BLC Progs. V/S/1921 p.47.
25. Medinipur Hitaishi 23rd January 1922, RNP Bengal 11th February 1922.
26. Letters No. 2568 J.D. 25th August 1903, Rev-Gen V11/58/1903 (NRR).
27. The decision was bitterly opposed by a section of the Midnapur town lawyers fearful of losing their clients. BLC Progs. X11/1/1922 pp. 398-408.

parellel systems of arbitration, and to a phenomenal increase in the number of lawyers trained in the British system and ever hungry for litigation. There were even the bands of touts who toured villages promoting litigation and bringing clients to lawyers for a small commission[28]. In Midnapur, court work was increased also by the activities of the 'criminal tribes', mainly the Lodhas, who operated around Naraingarh, and the Tantias who took to crime following the destruction of silk cultivation in the district[29]. The result, given the sheer size of the district was that the number of cases tended to overwhelm the judicial staff and the District Magistrate and Additional District Magistrate (See Table 2:1).

The District Magistrate and the Sessions Judge had to be on the look out for any competent or semi-competent man to serve as Honorary Magistrate and relieve the judicial staff of some of the petty cases[30]. These officers also had to supervise the conduct of the judges, ensuring for example that those with a high record of acquittals in criminal cases were kept away from delicate cases involving the police[31]. An indication of the heavy pressure on the judicial services comes from the fact that the average duration of a criminal case before the Sessions Court was over 32 sittings[32]. The congestion in the courts was another example of the crisis that had overwhelmed the district administration in Midnapur.

By 1907, official circles in Bengal were alive to the difficulties of district administration, especially in Midnapur[34]. It was generally recognised that reforms were needed at once. The rise of the terrorist movement in the wake of the Swadeshi agitation convinced the government that "nothing could be more unfortunate than the lack of personal contact between the District Officer and the people which at present prevails"[35]. To the conservative

28. Ni har 14th May 1918.
29. Midnapore District Gazetteer p. 151
30. Jud-Gen 1V/3/1927 and 1V/3/1928 (MRR)
31. See the case of Judge Delevingue of Midnapur Court GOB H. Poll 443/1915 (WBSA).
32. Rev-Gen XX/28(11a)/1926 (MRR).
33. Gen V11/56/1905-6 (MRR).
34. Gen V11/56/1905-6 (MRR).
35. Bengal Political Progs. Political Dept, July 1913 No. 5.

TABLE 2:1[33]

LITIGATION IN THE BURDWAN DIVISION OF BENGAL 1902 - 1903

	1902		1903	
	Instituted	Tried	Instituted	Tried
Contai S.D.	2544	1257	2142	901
Tamluk S.D.	2711	1477	2959	1596
Midnapur	11038	5600	11805	5479
Bankura	3047	1524	3047	1490
Birbhum	3693	1630	3386	1766
Hoogly	6008	4203	5611	4063
Burdwan	8653	4714	7934	4041
Howrah	11514	8272	12659	9518

officials of the Bengal government, the only way forward which also kept intact the paternalistic rule in the districts, was the partition of the large districts like Mymensingh and Midnapur:

> .....there is no doubt that the amount of work which the Collector has to do is so great that, however energetic he may be, he cannot have the time to devote to the various departments of his work which the Collector should have and at the same time be able to visit the various parts of this extensive district[36].

Moreover, it was argued that large districts like Midnapur were precisely the ones which had 'given trouble' during the Swadeshi movement. It was felt that the personal influence of the British District Officer would be adequate to check the major causes of discontent, but that officer would have to be relieved of a substantial amount of paper work[37]. This attitude, exemplified by Bengal officials to stall more 'radical' proposals coming from other quarters, which challenged the basic idea of paternalistic rule[38].

There is little doubt that had the partition of Midnapur been effected, it would have created an additional Collector/District Magistrate and reduced some of his paper work. The wheels of bureaucracy would undoubtedly have turned a little faster. But there is little to suggest that this simple division of labour would have geared the administration to either coping with political discontent or pursuing a more active policy of intervention in the localities, some of a vaguely developmental nature. The Government of Bengal and its officers during the first two decades of the present century, viewed the political crisis arising from the growth of nationalism as a purely administrative problem. The symptoms of the administrative crisis outlined in this section were recognised by them, but their remedy was an even stronger dose of paternalism

36. Commissioner to Chief Secy, GOB 16th March 1905, General V11/56/1905-6 (MRR)
37. Report of the District Administration Committee p.28.
38. One aspect of this controversy, between the conservative "Bengal Zamindari" School and the "peasant" School advocated by officials in Punjab, is covered in Peter Robb Peasants, Politics and Empire: the British Dilemma in India Chapter 2 (unpublished).

coupled with 'ma-baap' dedication and mass contact[39]. It was this particular perception of events in Bengal that blinded them to the problems of local self-government, village government and nationalism as integral elements of the crisis. Essentially, the Bengal government advocated solutions which time and events had rendered obsolete.

Local Self Government

Lord Ripon's famous Resolution on Local Self-Government of 18th May 1882 had established the institutional parameters of development works in India. The problems of sanitation, health, communications and even primary education, which would provide the infrastructure for the expansion of market relations, was to be vested in various bodies created by colonial government. By 1888, the Government of Bengal had established in Midnapur a District Board, seven municipalities and five Union Committees. These were followed by the establishment of Local Boards with subdivisions as the unit. In his Resolution, Ripon had observed: "It is not primarily with a view to improvement in administration that this measure is put forward and supported. It is chiefly designed as an instrument of political and popular education[40]." What this meant in practice was, in the words of O'Malley, that they would "provide an outlet for the ambitions and aspirations which had been created by the education, civilisation, and material progress introduced by the British"[41]. To take it one step further, the establishment of these boards reflected the general policy of the Raj of intervening in the localities to institute independent sources of revenue to finance local projects. Since this involved additional doses of taxation, the Boards were useful in roping in additional collaborators who would play an active role in dispensing patronage. They were a means for the integration of new leaders and men in the political process[42]. As such, the policy reflected by far the most subtle move after 1857 to strengthen the material and political foundations of British rule.

39. Peter Robb - The Government of India and Reform: Policies towards Politics and the Constitution 1916-21 Oxford 1976 p.12
40. H. Tinker The Foundations of Local Self Government in India Pakistan, and Burma London 1954, p.44
41. Ibid, p.44.
42. John G. Leonard 'Urban Government Under the Raj: A Case Study of Municipal Administration in Nineteenth Century South India' M.A.S. 7.2.1973 p.250.

But thanks to the intransigence of the officials in Calcutta, the policy turned out to be a half-measure. In rural Bengal, the District Boards were the main agencies of rural development, with the Local Boards acting as clearing houses. So concerned was the government about the articulate bhadrolok swamping the Boards that almost all power was vested in the hands of the District Magistrate who was also Chairman of the District Board[43]. It was felt by government that:

> As long as the District Magistrate is the Chairman of the District Board, that body must have the greater prestige and must attract the bigger zamindars whose interest it is most important to evoke[44].

Nominated and ex-officio members together comprised a majority in the District Board and two of the Local Boards[45]. The results were disastrous, as overworked District Magistrates rode roughshod over any dissent which arose[46]. Government succeeded in imposing its effective control over the District Board, but at the cost of any worthwhile Indian participation. In 1909, the average attendance in the 15 quorate Midnapur District Board meetings was a mere 9.5 out of a membership of 25[47].

The assumption that the presence of the District Magistrate would attract the bigger zamindars also turned out to be erroneous. "I think", noted a prominent zamindar, "Membership of a District Board at present is not very attractive to the best people, because they think that they cannot do much on the Board, and the will of the District Magistrate will prevail"[48] Bhupendranath Basu, the Moderate leader said: "The District Officer interferes too much in every trifling detail, causing unnecessary friction, and where it is probably not at all needed"[49].

43. This phenomenom was by no means confined to Bengal. Francis Robinson, 'Municipal Government and Muslim Seperatism in the United Provinces 1883 to 1916' in Gallagher, Robinson, Seal (ed) Locality, Province and Nation. Essays on Indian Politics 1870 to 1940, Cambridge 1973, p70 - points to the same phenomenom in UP. John Leonard, op. cit p.233, argues that in South India the British created a professional municipal bureaucracy to negate the influence of politicians.
44. Bengal Municipal Progs. (Municipal) p/8934, No. 614 LS-G 20th March 1912.
45. Resolution 126 LS-G, 18th January 1910, Bengal Municipal Progs, February 1910, No. 5.
46. Tinker, op. cit, p. 54.
47. Bengal Municipal Progs, February 1910 No. 15.
48. DCR, Vol 4, para 15429. Evidence of Rai Kishore Lal Goswami Bahadur.
49. DCR, Vol 4, para 13116.

These sentiments were also echoed by Surendranath Bannerjea, from the moderate standpoint[50]. In Midnapur, between 1907 and 1917, only one big zamindar of any consequence - Radha Gobinda Pal - was on the District Board. True there were some minor zamindars like Atal Behari Sinha, Brajendra Nath Ray, Heramba Chandra Ray and Kailash Chandra Bhunia. But they owed their position to official patronage, and did not possess the independent base of the zamindars of say, Narajole, Mahisadal or Gopiballavpur. It is also to be noted that the sharp confrontation between the officials and the zamindars during the Swadeshi agitation in Midnapur also kept the latter from identifying too closely with government inspired institutions like the District Board[51].

There was also a conscious resentment against the concentration of power in the hands of the District Magistrate. In 1909, the Decentralisation Commission expressed the view that the District Magistrate should continue to remain the Chairman of the District Board, but that his position should be akin to a 'constitutional ruler' abiding by the feelings of the Board[52]. This view provoked much discussion in the Vernacular Press, and the views of Basumati, published from Calcutta, were fairly reflective of existing educated Bengali opinion:

> We are of the opinion that District Magistrates already possess too much power. They are already each a lat in his own district. At their nod the most influential man in the district can be imprisoned. Moreover, he cannot be brought to book if even he does something most objectionable for the sake of prestige. If over and above this their powers are further increased the result is bound to be deplorable. The young civilians before they have quite freed themselves from impetuosity of youth, are entrusted with such powers as are calculated to drive even angels off their heads. None but the Tsar of Russia and the Kaiser of Germany possess such powers. It is true that the people of this country do not willingly come forward to offer advice to the rulers. The reason is that most of the rulers do not want advice properly so called[53].

50. Bengal Municipal Progs. (Municipal) January 1916 No. 3.
51. This is discussed in a later section.
52. Tinker, op. cit, p.86.
53. Basumati 1st May 1909, RNP Bengal 8th May 1909.

In Midnapur, the pressure of work forced the District Magistrate into a position whereby he took only a cursory interest in the actual running of the District Board. In any case, their superiors in Calcutta never encouraged them to give priority to this arena of administration. The day-to-day work of the Board was supervised by a non-official Chairman, enjoying the confidence of the local officialdom, who devoted part of his energies to the District Board[54]. Between 1910 and 1916, the Vice Chairman of the Midnapur District Board was Sital Prasad Ghose, the Public Prosecutor and a great favourite of the officials[55].

Given the lack of public interest in the functioning of the District Board, and the fact that criticism was often construed as sedition[56]. the Vice Chairman had enormous powers in actually deciding the nature of the District Board resources. Atal Behari Sinha, a lawyer who handled government briefs in Pingla and who also had a small zamindari in Sabang, exploited these powers to his own personal advantage. When in 1918, the government sanctioned an expenditure of Rs 50,000 by the District Board for the excavation of tanks, Sinha used 80% of the money on Pingla and Sabang alone. The entire subdivisions of Tamluk and Contai received nothing[57]. Such irregularities were not unique but the lack of any popular interest in the District Board made it easier for lapses to go almost unnoticed.

To add to the political ineptness of the District Board, there were innumerable bureaucratic obstacles put in its way, as regards expenditure. The Bengal Municipal Act of 1844 provided that "If any work is estimated to cost above Rs 5,000 the local government may require the plans and estimates of such works to be submitted for its approval, or for the approval of any officer of government, before such work is commenced". This effectively meant the priorities of the District Board were mainly tailored to the needs of the imperial government, rather than to providing social services for the native population. The Bengal government was insistent that District Boards should not get grants at random but only for specific and approved

54. Bengal Municipal Progs (L&G), March 1913, No. 5.
55. This demonstrated by the remakrable regularity of his appearances on the District Board 'commended' list.
56. For example, Medini Bandhav was prosecuted by the Contai Subdivisional Officer after the paper had exposed the illegal transfer of funds from the local Vidyasagar fund meant for education to the newly established Bradley-Burt Dispensary. Medini Bandhav, 4th May 1914 RNP, Bengal 23rd May, 1914. 57. NIHAR 27 MAY 1919.

projects[58]. Though the Finance Secretary, C. E. A. Oldham, claimed in 1908, that reasonable facilities existed for a "progressive District Board" to get any money it was justified in asking for[59], the Government of Bengal fought against giving up its control of the organs of local self-government because of the fears that the bodies might be taken over by the nationalists. When the Hobhouse Committee recommended that District Boards and Municipalities should have unlimited control over their budgets without interference from the District Magistrate and the Commissioner, the Government of Bengal fought a desperate rearguard action to stall the implementation of this policy[60]. In fact, the Chief Secretary, E. V. Levinge, thought that the recommendations were irrelevant to the needs of Bengal[61]. All in all, the period before 1915 exposed the widening gap between the advocates of devolution of power in Delhi, and the Government of Bengal still dominated by hard-line intransigent imperialists. It was with some justice that influential Bengalis could refer to the "Sham of local self-government"[62]

By 1909, the Government of Bengal had recognised that District Boards were not exactly shining proof of the success of local self-government in the province. Besides other weaknesses, failure was chiefly ascribed to the shortage of funds at the disposal of the District Board[63]. Before 1914, the main source of District Board finance was a statutory 25% of the Public Works Cess and grants-in-aid from the government for specified projects. Besides the maintenance of District Board roads, most of the money was spent on primary and secondary education, a head in which the Midnapur District Board exceeded the provincial average by 1½ times[64]. The members of the District Board often complained of the inadequacy of funds to finance projects like rural water supply, which was a pressing local need.[65] Unfortunately, what really seems to have happened was that inherent financial conservatism coupled with any real lack of enthusiasm ensured that a significant portion of the income went unspent.

58. Bengal Municipal Progs (LSG), P/8420. August No. 21-23.
59. DCR Vol IV, para 14926.
60. Bengal Municipal Progs. P/8418, July No. 66-67.
61. Bengal Political Progs (Police), June 1910, No. 40-1.
62. DCR Vol. IV, para 16940, Evidence of Kalipada Ghosh.
63. DCR Vol IV, para 14926. Evidence of C. E. A. Oldham.
64. Bengal Municipal Progs. (LSG) June 1915, No. 29
65. Bengal Municipal Progs, March 1913 No. 7.

In 1911 - 12, this sum reached the staggering height of Rs 184,530. The problem proved particularly serious after 1913 - 14 when the transfer of the entire Public Works Cess to the District Board almost doubled their income overnight[66]. This boost in income was also followed by the Government of Bengal, under pressure from Delhi, giving up all the statutory restrictions imposed on expenditure.

If the government version of the failure of local self-government in the province is to be believed, the transfer of the Public Works Cess to the District Board in 1913 - 14 would have led to an automatic improvement in the performance and credibility of the District Board in Midnapur. The increased powers of patronage should have inevitably led to the much sought after zamindars flocking for membership of the Board. But between 1914 and 1920 there occurred no significant change in the style of local politics in Midnapur, as conducted within the District Board. The increase in financial resources did not immediately lead to a corresponding change in the District Board structures. Even without the statutory controls from Calcutta, it was the District Magistrate who continued to dominate the proceedings. Without any enlarged franchise, the membership of the Board in the period 1914 - 1921 continued to be as unrepresentative as before, containing as it did a sprinkling of second-string loyalist-zamindars and government lawyers. But the increase in District Board resources was only the first step in the politicisation of that body, which was to make it a more attractive institution for intervention. The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 and Surendranath Bannerjea's Bengal Village Self-Government Act of 1920 were to change the structures, and in an atmosphere of growing political tension after 1920, were to make the District Board the central arena of the politicians of Midnapur.

Municipalities

If District Boards failed really to get off the ground in terms of public participation, municipal politics prior to 1921 provided the forum where the publicists could stand up and hope to be

66. Bengal Municipal Progs (LSG), June 1915, No. 29.

counted. Lacking any forms of modern industrialisation, Midnapur was a predominantly rural district, the towns being important only as administrative centres, or in the case of Kharagpur, as a major railway junction. Urbanisation in India was related to economic development and religion. Given the virtual stagnation of agriculture in Bengal and the absence of any major centres of pilgrimage, the towns in Midnapur declined both in size and importance over the years (see Table 2:2). These factors would explain why urban municipal politics in Midnapur never reached the exciting dimensions witnessed in say, Benares or Rajahmundry.[67]

The structure of municipalities provided an environment whereby some limited political activity could be carried out. This was because unlike the District Board, a defined political arena, albeit restricted, existed in the form of the rate-payers (See Table 2:3). Moreover, unlike the District Board, the municipality was allowed to have a non-official Chairman and an elected majority. This superficial freedom from official control ensured that discussions within municipalities were intense, passionate and political. The elections too, especially in Midnapur town, were keenly contested and voter turnout often exceeded 60%. But this superficial liberalisation was offset by paltry resources at the disposal of the body and statutory restrictions on expenditure. The gradual economic decline of most of the towns made local taxation a difficult proposition, thus reducing the potential for patronage and nullifying any political impact the municipalities might have had (See Table 2:4). The only exception to this trend was Midnapur municipality, housing the District Headquarters and an European population, which a combination of financial resources and internal structure gave a position of political importance before 1921[68].

The abundance of lawyers at the District Courts and the presence of an active Bar Council in Midnapur town ensured that a large proportion

67. C. Bayly, 'Patrons and Politics in Northern India' in Gallagher, Johnson etc. op. cit. and John Leonard op. cit.
68. Kharagpur, although situated in the district, has not been dealt with in the thesis. The politics of Kharagpur was fundamentally different, embracing an organised working class. It would be out of place to tackle the phenomenom of working class politics in a study that is concentrated on rural politics.

TABLE 2:2

Population of Towns in Midnapur District 1901-1931

	1901	1911	1921	1931
Midnapur	33,140	32,740	28,965	32,021
Kharagpur		18,957	25,280	58,134
Ghatal	14,525	12,064	10,770	12,400
Chandrakona	9,309	8,121	6,470	6,016
Ramjibanpur	10,264	8,481	6,700	6,230
Khirpai	5,045	4,605	3,756	3,693
Kharar	9,508	8,839	6,580	5,736
Tamluk	8,085	8,048	8,348	9,095
Contai				5,259

(Compiled from Census Reports)

TABLE 2:3

Municipalities in Midnapur in 1911-12

Municipality	Population	Ratepayers	Voters+	% of Population
Midnapur	33,138	5,580	2,366	7.14
Tamluk	7,872	1,906	648	8.23
Ghatal	14,537	2,570	695	4.78
Chandrakona	9,315	2,353	342	3.67
Ramjibanpur	10,265	1,908	371	3.61
Khirpai	4,995	1,083	327	6.55
Kharar	9,493	1,386	556	5.85

(Compiled from Bengal Municipal Proceedings)

+ = figures for 1908-09.

TABLE 2:4

Financial Position of Municipalities in Midnapur

	1905-6	1910-11	1914-15	1921-22
Receipts				
Midnapur	78,259	79,994	126,381	244,239
Tamluk	13,448	14,995	15.545	15,984
Ghatal	10,536	8,980	16,846	16,685
Chandrakona	4,935	6,495	4,882	7,603
Ramjibanpur	3,317	4,179	6,225	6,143
Khirpai	3,641	3,821	9,272	6,654
Kharar	4,389	6,330	7,423	7,165
Expenditure				
Midnapur	70,983	69,853	121,161	135,783
Tamluk	11,242	11,714	17,347	13,657
Ghatal	8,783	8,893	17,889	17,589
Chandrakona	4,892	5,086	4,902	7,069
Ramjibanpur	4,170	4,279	4,661	4,985
Khirpai	3,651	3,016	6,990	5,608
Kharar	4,710	5,380	7,690	6,034

(Compiled from Midnapore District Gazetteers, B. Volume and Bengal Municipal Proceedings)

of the more successful lawyers took a keen interest in the affairs of the municipality and sought election as Commissioners. In the period under review, Midnapur municipality was dominated by the presence of two very colourful lawyers - Upendra Nath Maity, and the young barrister, Birendra Nath Sasmal. Maity was the Chairman of the Municipality from 1912 as well as President of the local Bar Council. He was broadly sympathetic to the nationalist cause, a factor which was responsible for his being implicated in the Midnapur Bomb Conspiracy Case, though the charges against him were later dropped. His appeal was largely personal rather than political, and his sights did not extend beyond the district. Opposed to this was the personality of Sasmal, the son of a minor Contai zamindar. From a very young age Sasmal had involved himself in Congress activities in Contai and Calcutta. He was the first Mahishya to qualify as a barrister from England, a feat which made him well-known in the district. He was an ambitious man who set his sights high, but who until 1921 was content to remain in the background of municipal politics[69], in the face of Maity's local dominance.

Also influential in the Midnapur municipality was the extraordinary figure of Raja Narendra Lal Khan of Narajole, one of the biggest zamindars of the district. The Raja shot to notoriety during the Swadeshi agitation when he was implicated in the Midnapur Bomb Conspiracy Case and when he later brought a defamation suit against the Collector, Donald Weston, for supposedly accepting bribes. For this he was declared persona non grata by the government and omitted from the Midnapur Khas Mulakati list[70]. In fact, the Raja alone epitomised the forces of militant nationalism in Midnapur before 1921. But his influence was not limited to the active nationalists in the district or outside: his fame was also dependent on his acts of philanthropy. He was reputed to have personally paid for the excavation of about 400 tanks in the district for public use, many of which were in Midnapur town. He was closely involved with the local Ramakrishna Mission and had donated a house to the Mission

69. P. Pal Deshapran Sasmal Calcutta 1388 B.S. pp. 19-25.
70. GOB H. Poll 388/1918 (WBSA).

to enable it to operate in Midnapur. Lastly, he was also known to have sponsored the studies of many students from Midnapur, including one who was sent for an art course to Paris[71].

Lastly mention must be made of the presence in the municipality of Surya Kumar Agasti, who involved himself in municipal affairs after retirement from government service.

The involvement of these personalities with strong nationalist backgrounds gave the municipal politics of Midnapur town, a strong anti-government flavour. In a way this was not unexpected given the limited number of forums available to Indians, especially nationalists, to make their political points. This was in an atmosphere where the educated Hindus all over Bengal had become intensely politicised and consciously aware of the alien nature of the existing government.

The lack of a proper water supply in Midnapur town brought the entire question of government financing into focus. On 28th July 1916, the District Board decided to contribute a sum of Rs 50,000 for the establishment of water works in Midnapur town, the cost of which was then estimated at Rs 400,000. The Raja of Narajole was persuaded after considerable pressure had been exerted on him by the District Magistrate to contribute a sum of Rs 50,000; he was made to sign a bond to that effect. Further subscriptions from wealthy citizens yielded another Rs 50,000. This last sum could have been higher, but the zamindars deliberately kept their contributions low to register their protest against the contemplated partition of the district. The District Magistrate, W. A. Marr, suggested to the municipality on 28th August 1916 that government would sanction Rs 200,000 as a grant and Rs 50,000 as loan for the completion of the project. For Marr, this was an essential political step as the credibility of the government had reached rock-bottom following a concerted campaign launched by the local vernacular press. The press had accused the government of unnecessarily spending vast sums of money on the construction of a new district headquarters

71. Interview with Mrs. Anjali Khan 29th July 1978

at Hijli, in the face of local opposition, when basic civic amenities were lacking in Midnapur town. Earlier, the government's image had not benefited when the Governor, Lord Carmichael, in 1915, while replying to a local petition asking for a grant for the water-works, had suggested that they dig an experimental well instead, for which he would be pleased to sanction Rs 5,000. For the District Magistrate therefore, this grant was imperative to restore some of government prestige. But officials in Calcutta were unwilling to oblige. Secretary, L.S.S. O'Malley wrote back regretting the government's inability to sanction either a grant or a loan. Neither could government hold out any "Hope of being able to assist the municipality at present. When financial conditions improve, Government trust that they will be in a position to make a grant and a loan to the municipality, but it is not possible to give any promise as to the amount of either"[72]

So the Midnapur water-works project collapsed for the time being for want of funds. Politically this action of government had important repercussions insofar as it demonstrated in practice the utter insensitivity of the government to the day-to-day material needs of the people. Moreover, this was at a time when government spokesmen were going around all districts attempting to raise contributions to the war effort. The utter callousness shown by the government to a problem that had recently been a cause of a very severe typhoid and cholera epidemic almost overnight nullified, in Midnapur town at least, any last illusion people had over the paternalistic nature of British rule. Far from drawing in new collaborating elements into closer relationship with British rule, the municipality had raised expectations among the people which imperial rule could not meet[73].

Official interference too led to conflicts between the municipal commissioners and the government. In 1913, Maulvi Altaf Ahmed,

72. L.S.S. O'Malley to Secy, Sanitary Board, 21st February 1917. Bengal Municipal Progs. March 1917 No. 60-62.
73. Bengal Municipal Progs. (Municipal) January 1915. No 25-27 and March 1917, No. 57-62. Medini Bandhav 29th September 1913, RNP Bengal 18th October 1913.

Sub-Deputy Collector, who had revised the assessment of municipal taxes in Midnapur town, was transferred to Bihar. The transfer was engineered by the Collector to prevent the Maulvi from hearing the objections to the assessments, as he suspected his hand in some corrupt activities. The municipal commissioners however, thought that the whole assessment ought to be conducted by one officer and sought his recall. The District Magistrate, without consultation with the municipal commissioners, wired the Maulvi informing him that his services were not wanted in Midnapur[74]. The incident, hardly uncommon, and trivial as it was, did not contribute to any furtherance of the British desire to make new friends.

The government's interference was sorely resented during the elections to the post of Chairman of Midnapur municipality in 1912. The Raja of Narajole, fresh from his confrontations with the authorities in the Bomb Conspiracy Case, declared himself a candidate. He also announced that if elected, he would donate Rs 1 lakh to the costs of establishing a water-work for the town. The decision of the Raja was welcomed by the 'nationalist' group in the municipality, and Upendra Nath Maity and Surya Kumar Agasti, two contenders for the post, decided to withdraw in favour of the Raja. But the decision of a marked political 'agitator' like the Raja to contest the post was frowned upon by the government, especially as he was certain to win. Mr. Patterson, the Additional District Magistrate, who took a personal interest in the matter, tried at first to split the Raja's votes. It was presumably on his instigation that the Medinipur Hitaishi took the view that the Raja, though generous, was incompetent:

> That is why we consider a young and energetic man like Mr. B. N. Basmal as a fit man for the Chairmanship... No amount of donation without good administration will improve the condition of the municipality[75].

When this approach failed, the Additional District Magistrate summoned Upendra Nath Maity and informed him that government would veto the election of the Raja. Maity walked out and divulged the

74. Bengal Municipal Progs. Routine Matters, July 1913 No. 1.
75. Medinipur Hitaishi 8th July 1912, RNP Bengal 13th July 1912.

conversation to the press[76]. The revelations of Maity had the desired effect. The Calcutta press immediately took up the issue claiming that it was a clear instance of how even municipal commissioners had not the liberty to elect their own Chairman[77]. "How can", wrote the Dainik Chandrika, "a man who can make a gift of a lakh to the municipality, be indifferent to the question of civic improvement?"[78] The Hitavadi pointed out that it was on political grounds that the election was being opposed. Sanjivani advised the Commissioners to persist in electing the Raja in spite of vetoes, claiming that it was a question of civic autonomy[79].

But government remained instransigent and the commissioners were unwilling to make the matter a test case of autonomy. Thus, the Raja was finally advised by his associates to stand down. Upendra Nath Maity was instead elected Chairman.

The election episode demonstrated the government's dread of anything remotely close to nationalist aspirations. The conduct of the Raja was not political but based on his ability to contribute generously to the municipal coffers. The government opposed him because of his associations with the Swadeshi movement - an overtly political act. The method of opposition was crude, and though the district administration won the day in 1912 the success left behind a feeling of resentment of the sort of which political agitations are made. Municipalities were created by the Raj to strengthen the basis of its rule in India . In Midnapur, economic decline of the towns coupled with paucity of resources made 6 of the 7 municipalities mere paper bodies lacking any real power or influence. In Midnapur town, where some success in the local self-government game had been achieved, the government threw away its chances of expanding the network of collaborators by its insensitive handling of issues. In a sense, the Bengal Government was naive in hoping for blind loyalty in an atmosphere of rising political expectations. In the case of Midnapur town, they hoped for a pliant municipality a'la the District Board; and when that did not happen, they resorted to bureaucratic heavy-handedness, in the process ruining the very purpose of their

76. Amrita Bazar Patrika 2nd July 1912, RNP Bengal 6th July 1912.
77. Ibid.
78. RNP Bengal 13th July 1912
79. Ibid, 20th July 1912.

enterprise.

Union Committees

If Midnapur municipality constituted the only island of politicisation, the Union Committees were firmly drowned in the sea of apathy surrounding institutional politics in Midnapur. Union Committees were institutions created by the government in any place which "contains a large bazaar, which is not sufficient importance to be made into a muncipality, but in which the need of sanitation, etc, is felt"[80] By 1914, Midnapur had six Union Committees in existence, though the Committee at Contai town could easily have qualified for the status of a municipality.

Union Committees had little power and even less finance. They were dependent on the District Board for nearly all their income. It was argued that the District Board grant would be a stimulus for corresponding taxation, but that did not turn out to be true. Only the Contai Union Committee raised local taxes. The members of the Committee, appointed by the District Magistrate, were unwilling to incur local wrath by sanctioning local taxation. Commenting on this phenomenon Sital Prasad Ghosh, the then Vice Chairman remarked in 1914:

> No question of local taxation has yet been raised, as it has been found that the mention of this subject extinguishes all zeal in the formation of Unions. But I believe that once the people are convinced of the benefits to be derived from the establishment of a Union, there will be no difficulty in persuading them to pay a small local rate[81].

This optimism turned out to be unfounded. The wealthier residents of the Unions, paying rent or revenue, the Public Works Cess and Chaukidari tax, saw no justification in paying tax to maintain a body whose mere existence seemed redundant. Not surprisingly, all but one of the Committees refused even to consider the prospects of further taxation and allowed the Committees to sink into peaceful slumber. The Union Committees were one of the biggest fiascos of the Raj's local self-government experiment.

80. Bengal Municipal Progs, (LSG) July 1914. No 1 - 10.
81. Bengal Municipal Progs, (LSG) October 1911 No. 22

Table 2:5[82]

AVERAGE INCOME AND EXPENDITURE OF UNION COMMITTES 1908-1911

	Income	Expenditure
Contai	1,035	1,100
Pingla	500	Not available
Lowada	470	209
Panskura	350	Not available
Jara	403	137

Village Government

The District Board, Union Committees and all but one of the municipalities though inactive, did not provoke any active resentment by their mere existence. This was not the case with the system of village government in Bengal, which provided the seeds of the agitations that were to sweep Midnapur in the 1920's and 1930's and bring politics into the remote interior.

In 1870, the Government of Bengal enacted legislation to strengthen government control of the villages and provide the institutional framework through which it could intervene more actively. The problem that faced the Government of Bengal differed substantially from that of those parts of India, like the United Provinces, where there existed some village community structure. In Bengal, this no longer existed and, in some parts, had never existed. The 1870 Chaukidari Act sought to institutionalise the system of village watch that was in existence and institute Panchayats. In the latter case, this meant the creation of a new agency, not the revival of a dormant one.

By the Act of 1870, the District Magistrate was empowered to nominate Panchayats in each village which were to supervise and

82. Bengal Municipal Progs (LSG) October 1911 No.22

appoint Chaukidars. Unlike in the past, when Chaukidars were given rent-free chakran lands, the new system instituted the chaukidari tax levied on every villager according to means. The government hoped that this would free chaukidars from the control of the zamindars and encourage them to serve the village as a whole. As Rivers Thompson explained in his speech while introducing the Bill:

> The Bill proceeds upon the recognition of the fact that the village chaukidar is purely a village servant employed for the protection of the lives and property of the villager and looking to the village community for the regular payment of the remuneration to which he is entitled.[83]

The government, besides appointing the Panchayat, had very little control over the chaukidar. It was the Panchayat who selected the chaukidar, had powers to dismiss him and determine his pay. In that sense, the chaukidar belonged to the village.

In 1892, the Chaukidari Act was amended. The amendment empowered the District Magistrate not only to appoint the Panchayats, but also gave him full control of the chaukidars including the right of appointment, dismissal, punishment or reward. The chaukidars became servants of the state but continued to be paid out of the proceeds of the chaukidari tax. In addition to their normal watch duties, the chaukidars were required to assist the police in their duties, deliver summonses on behalf of the courts, attend on touring officers and make arrangements for their conveyance.[84]

The cumulative effect of the 1870 and 1892 legislation was to increase the pace of discontent against the government in the villages. With the control of the chaukidars taken out of their hands, the Panchayats lost their raison d'être and were transformed into glorified tax-collectors. This loss of responsibility ensured that the educated and 'respectable' men in the villages were reluctant to take on this unenviable job.[85] The general result was that Panchayats became the

83. Forward 19th December 1925.
84. BLC Progs XIV/6/1924 p.8.
85. Commissioner Burdwan Division to GOB 23rd February 1909 GOB H. Poll 187/1908 No. 19 (WBSA).

stooges of the local daroga and made up of people who were constantly involved in village factionalism and incessant litigation, in short the most undesirable people for any responsible job.[86] The Circle Officers, who were appointed following the recommendations of the 1915 District Administration Committee Report, made the situation worse. The District Magistrate was totally dependent on the Circle Officer and the daroga in deciding whom to appoint as Panchayat or chaukidar. These officers felt that if important people were appointed to Panchayats, their importance would diminish in the eyes of the district authorities. By law, the Panchayat was a superior body to the Circle Officer and daroga. By appointing their own favourites, the latter two ensured their own control over the village institution.[87] In 1918, in Contai, the President's of the Panchayats were made investigating officers in faujdari cases. But this power was quickly withdrawn when the courts discovered the amazing unreliability of their reports.[88] The local press in Midnapur was unanimous in its verdict that the effectiveness of Panchayats had been undermined by government and police officers.

The behaviour of the chaukidars also caused great resentment in the villages. After 1892, chaukidars became government servants under the control of government officers. They acted arbitrarily and offended the sensibilities of the village notables who had no control over them. As a vernacular paper described the situation:

> So far as we can see, the only purpose that the chaukidar serves is to supply provisions for Police and Executive officers when they are on tour, prepare the hookah for the Panchayat, send to the thana statistics of birth and death, pompously go about the streets with a police constable, long after any theft or dacoity or riot happens to have taken place, converse with the local daroga perhaps on theological questions, and above all collect chaukidari tax even by attaching people's moveable properties.[89]

These allegations were repeated in the Legislative Council by Indian members:

86. Nihar 5th August 1924.
87. Hijli Hitaishi 21st July 1927.
88. Nihar 5th August 1924.
89. Mohammadi 27th February 1914, BNP Bengal 14th March 1914.

> The chaukidar is unfortunately the servant of every person in authority who happens to pass through his village...he is the most unpopular servant of the Crown in the village.[90]

In Contai, there were complaints that increase in crime was due to chaukidars working in collusion with robber gangs, and detaining people illegally.[91] The daroga of a Bhagawanpur village, Rehayat Bux, was personally responsible for recruiting notorious thugs like Maqbul Dafadar, Ishwar Jana, Satish Dafadar to serve as chaukidars with predictable results.[92] In short, the behaviour and action of chaukidars were a source of great unease in the villages, giving rise to conscious resentment against governmental authority.

A natural consequence was that the payment of chaukidari tax was greatly resented by the entire village population. Prior to 1870, the villagers paid no direct chaukidari tax. The chaukidaris were assigned rent free chakran lands to cultivate. "Besides this he used to get cash payments from the bhadrolok class on occasions of marriage ceremonies or other festivals. He also used to get free service from the village carpenters, the village smith and the village porter, while the agriculturists used to supply him with a portion of their production such as rice, pulse, rye etc.[93]" While this picture was undoubtedly too idyllic, there is little doubt that the imposition of an additional cash tax was a source of great irritation, especially as it covered all classes of people, except the zamindars who were exempt.[94]

Section 15 of the Chaukidari Act provided:

> The rate to be levied in any village for the purposes of this Act shall be an assessment according to the circumstances and the property to be protected of the person liable to the same: Provided that the amount to be assessed shall not be more than one rupee per mensem, and that all persons who in in the opinion of the panchayat, are too poor to pay half anna a month shall be altogether exempt from assessment.[95]

90. BLC Progs VIII/1922 p.139. Speech by Indu Bhusan Dutta.
91. Nihar 3rd October 1916 and 2nd September 1924.
92. Prabodh Chandra Basu Bhagawanpur Thaner Ithibritya Calcutta 1976, p. 127-28.
93. Amrita Bazar Patrika 12th February 1929.
94. BLC Progs. VII/1922, p.137.
95. Ibid IV/1921, p. 25. The assessment was doubled in 1922.

Given the fact that the assessment was done by the Panchayat without any rigid guidelines, it was bound to be arbitrary. Government sources indicated that the incidence of the tax was frequently unfair. The Panchayat almost invariably under-assessed themselves and their friends, while over-assessing those unfavourably disposed towards them.[96] In No. 13 Union of Bhagawanpur thana, two Brahmins, Panchanand Panda and Ishwar Chandra Panda, were exempt from the tax while people who worked for them and whose income was lower, had to pay it. In fact, the villagers were forced to pay for the Brahmins collectively.[97] In 1914, there were widespread reports that chaukidars in flood-affected areas in Contai were attaching the movable property of villagers in spite of a government order for remission of chaukidari tax.[98] Nor were these isolated examples. The Indian Police Commission of 1902-03 observed 'there is a body of evidence that the assessment falls too heavily on the poor'[99] This was again confirmed in a survey done by H. Wheeler in 1906, which noted "the tendency to tax the poor and under-assess the rich"[100]

The irregularities involved in, and the distasteful nature of the entire system of village government was not unknown in Calcutta. District Magistrates were near-unanimous "in thinking that the tax is very unpopular and is generally regarded as oppressive and its collection is distasteful to the panchayat, its abolition would be desirable and would be highly appreciated by the people"[101] F. W. Duke, a member of the Governor's Executive Council also noted: "The chaukidari tax is no doubt felt, and no relief would be more welcome"[102] By 1908, the Government of Bengal seriously considered abolition of the chaukidari tax, but did not pursue the matter as it would have seemed to be an admission of failure and regarded as a victory by the nationalists.[103]

The policy of denying the Swadeshi movement a short-term victory, was to have disastrous long-term effects on the political future of the Raj. The bureaucratically-inspired imbalances in the village power structure and the exploitative nature of the tax assessment were to provide ideal ammunition to Congress agitators. The nature of the resentment against

96. Commissioner to GOB, 23rd February 1909, GOB H. Poll 187/1908 No. 19 (WBSA).
97. Nihar i June 1920.
98. Nihar 20th January 1914, RNP Bengal 24th January 1914.
99. Sir Charles Allen, Secy GOB to Secy Home, GOI 30 September 1909 GOB H. Poll 187/1908 No 29 (WBSA).
100. Ibid.

the chaukidari tax gave Congress the cause of a multi-class campaign, embracing nearly all sections of the village, against British rule.

Conclusion

On 12th July 1917, in the House of Commons, Edwin Montagu denounced the Government of India as 'too wooden, too iron, too inelastic, too ante-diluvian, to be of any use for the modern purposes we have in mind'[104] What Montagu had 'in mind' was an extension of the functions of government in India. Prior to 1917, the government of Bengal was preoccupied with considerations of extending government authority but at the crucial cost of government legitimacy. The crucial test of the latter project lay in the ability of government to incorporate political life into the structures of colonial rule. In Midnapur, the authority of the government embraced almost all walks of life, but its legitimacy was minimal. There was certainly political activity in Midnapur before the introduction of dyarchy, but, except in one case, it clearly did not revolve around the so-called 'self-governing' structures set up under colonial rule. Though these structures permeated down to every level of the district, their existence was marked by apathy, indifference, and often resentment. Except for Midnapur municipality, this was ruined by bureaucratic heavy-handedness and insensitivity. But their mere existence and their arbitrary and undemocratic procedures gave rise to a conscious feeling of deprivation among the educated middle stratum in society, in an atmosphere where the entire basis of foreign colonial rule was being increasingly brought into question. Government intervention in Midnapur produced only a handful of insignificant collaborators abiding by the rules of the game. But it also produced tensions and imbalances which, coupled with the injection of an ideological dimension from outside, was to produce a situation which the Raj would find increasingly difficult to contain.

101. GOB H. Poll 187/1908 No. 19 (WBSA)
102. Note dated 29th October 1908, GOB H. Poll 187/1908 No. 1 (WBSA).
103. GOB H. Poll 187/1908 (WBSA)
104. P. Robb op. cit p.16.

LAND AND CASTE IN MIDNAPUR

Midnapur district was essentially rural; according to the Census of 1911, 2.71 million of the total population of 2.82 million lived in rural areas. In Midnapur, as in other agrarian societies, it was the control of land which was the crucial determinant in locating political power. This horizontal differentiation of society was compounded by vertical loyalties of caste. It is with these twin factors of land and caste, and their political dimensions that we shall be primarily concerned in this chapter.

Zamindars

The conventional view of power relations in rural Bengal have tended to concentrate on the zamindars, who are considered to be located at the apex of rural society. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 which conferred the right of private property on the zamindars, is seen as the great watershed. More recent studies on the subject have thrown doubts on the validity of this contention, and have suggested that, barring significant exceptions, real control of rural society did not rest in the hands of the zamindars. Political power, it has been suggested, was more localised; and zamindars, while having control over revenue, had only limited control over land.[1]

In 1764, the Collector of Midnapur noted that the whole district was "in the hands of hereditary Zamindars who derive their right from original sanads granted to their ancestors"[2] This was a result of Midnapur's strategic position as a frontier district providing a battleground for the Moghuls and later Alivardi Khan, and the Maratha raiders. As a result, in 1793, the East India Company had little or no difficulty in identifying the zamindars with whom to make settlement. But a problem was created by the fact that Midnapur unlike some other Bengal districts had a multiplicity of zamindars. There were ten large zamindari estates, but the bulk of the settlement was made with more than 3000 petty zamindars.[3] The problem assumed greater dimensions in the first three decades of the Permanent Settlement when estates were further

1. Rajat and Ratna Ray 'Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal' MAS IX,1 (1975) For the orthodox view see N.K. Sinha, Economic History of Bengal, Vol. 2, Calcutta 1962.
2. Quoted in A. K. Jamesson, 'The Permanent Settlement in Midnapur' Calcutta Review, 291 (1918), p.46

subdivided and auctioned. This was partly a result of the inability of zamindars to cope with the problems of over-assessment,[4] and of manoeuvres by other zamindars to convert estates into benami holdings with the connivance of corrupt amins.[5] Between 1793 and 1803, the total number of estates in the district increased from 1000 to 1900.[6] The Kassijora estate, once the largest and most flourishing in Midnapur, was split up into no fewer than 303 separate estates by 1800.[7] In fact, it was not until 1834, that the Collector could report with some certainty that the revenue assessment was light in proportion to the resources of the estate.[8]

The zamindari system in Midnapur was therefore deformed from the outset. Instead of Cornwallis' vision of great and improving landlords, the reality of Midnapur was a scattering of petty estates, some economically unviable, all controlled by local magnates with limited influence over small areas. Not that the large zamindaris favoured by British administrators did not exist. The Burdwan Raj spilled over into Midnapur, and the Mahtab family had substantial landed interests in Ghatal. The Brahmin Garga family of Mahisadal were the largest zamindars of the district with landed property valued at Rs 4866,948 in 1928-29;[9] Raja Sati Prasad Garga was credited with a personal income of Rs 3 lakhs in 1909.[10] The second largest zamindari belonged to the Khan family of Narajole. At the turn of the century, the Narajole zamindari covered an area of 309,613 acres; it embraced 2,916 villages and produced a government revenue of Rs 90,214.[11] Devendra Lal Khan also had a personal annual income of Rs 120,000 in 1926.[12] Then there was the British-owned Midnapur Zamindary Company, managed

3. B.B.Chaudhuri,'Land Market in Eastern India 1783-1940', IESHR XII, 2 (1975), p. 161: E. Stokes, The Peasant and the Raj, Cambridge 1978 p. 32.
4. Chaudhuri, op. cit, pp. 161-5: C. Palit, Tensions in Bengal Rural Society, Calcutta 1973, p. 12.
5. Jameson, op. cit.
6. Ibid, p.54.
7. Ibid, p.54.
8. Ibid, p.56-7.
9. Rev-Wards XVIII, 43/1930 (MRR).
10. Durbar list (non-officials). GOB H. Poll 104/1909 (WBSA).
11. Mohendro Lal Khan, History of the Midnapoor Raj, Calcutta 1889 pp. 23-25.
12. GOB. H. Poll 10/1926.

by Andrew Yule which had large interests in the Jungle Mahals.[13] But the existence of a dozen or so large zamindars does not detract from the fact that owing to preponderance of petty zamindars, the class basis for British rule was rather hollow. This was more so because as we saw in the last chapter, British policy was formulated with the purpose of incorporating the large zamindars into the political establishment. In Midnapur, the objective reality of land control made this an impossibility. This differentiation within the zamindari class also meant that there was a lack of economic solidarity between the zamindars. In other words, though they shared a similar relationship to the modes of production, based on the exraction of rent-surplus, their vastly different levels of exploitation ensured differing political interests and loyalties. It is not a curious accident that in the 1920's and 1930's, the petty zamindars found themselves in political alliance with rich tenants rather than their class counterparts the major zamindars.

The zamindari stratum perpetuated by the 1793 settlement did not then correspond to the dreams of Lord Cornwallis: it was also weakened politically by tenancy and rent legislation down to the end of the 19th century. From 1930 until the passing of the Rent Act in 1859, the government launched a massive operation aimed at resuming the lakhiraj or rent free tenures from the zamindari estates. From the landlords' point of view this was unfortunate, since a number of them used lakhiraj tenures as a device to accumulate unassessed income. The Majnumutha estate in Contai held 54,242 bighas as lakhiraj and they were resumed at full rates.[14] The 1859 Rent Act was a minor setback for zamindari interests as it defined occupancy ryots as those who had been in continuous possession for twelve years and granted them security of tenure. It also specified certain conditions under which rent could be raised, and these provisions did not always favour the zamindars. Though the actual implementation of a paper act depended on the political balance of class forces in the countryside, the Rent Act did provide the institutional and legal framework whereby combinations of tenants could challenge the zamindar with at least the theoretical backing of the coercive apparatus

13. The political economy of the Jungle Mahals is discussed in more detail in a subsequent chapter.
14. Palit, op. cit. p.45.

of the state. The 1885 Tenancy Act, which merely streamlined the one of 1859, further aided this process. The growth of the legal profession and of an ever-increasing band of briefless lawyers, encouraged people to initiate litigation at cheap rates. Of course the importance of legislation must not be exaggerated. It must be emphasised that the law, in any case, was biased heavily in favour of the zamindar and any successful confrontation with him depended on a tilt in the local balance of forces. Moreover, the local officials tended, more often than not, to favour the interests of the large zamindars. For example during the resumption in the 1880's of paikan lands (those given to paiks and chaukidars rent-free), 1,822 bighas of land in Keshpur, in the Narajole zamindari, were resumed but the government expressed no opinion as to the status of the former paiks. Consequently, most of them were treated as tenants-at-will because of the particular balance of forces in the locality.[15] In short zamindars who had their house in order and commanded local influence were rarely affected. Legislation disadvantaged only those zamindars whose financial or political weaknesses made them vulnerable to pressure from below. Thus, by 1885, an atmosphere had been created whereby the strata of rural society immediately below small zamindars could assert themselves more confidently, in both political and legal terms.

In the face of a slowly mounting bureaucratic offensive there was therefore, a slight loosening of the terms of absolute politico-legal coercion; but zamindars who were kept on their toes could safeguard their interests. In East Bengal, one of the reasons that the zamindars found themselves on the defensive was their position as absentee landlords who thrived in an atmosphere of vulgar ostentation and conspicious consumption. The smaller zamindars gained relative strength from the fact that few among them were absentee. The exceptions were the Raja of Burdwan, the Nawab of Murshidabad, and the Sils of Calcutta; and in a strict sense, the first two could not really be called absentee, as they were based in neighbouring districts and had a well-organised estate management. The Raja of Burdwan, for example, took a personal interest in his Midnapur possessions from his palace in Burdwan.[16] However, absenteeism and lack of experience in

15. A. K. Jameson, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of Midnapur 1911-17 p.95.
16. GOB H. Poll 108/1907.

handling zamindari affairs cost the Sils dearly. Torn by internal family feuds and a staff of corrupt naibs and gomasthas, their estates was torn by disputes with tenants, often instigated by their own staff.[17] This question of absenteeism was not a moral one. Given the tradition of paternalism and docility prevalent in peasant societies, personal presence was an effective way of ensuring control. Thus the Narajole family based at the Gope Palace on the outskirts of Midnapur town managed to keep their sprawling estate in some semblance of order through personal scrutiny and active involvement in local affairs. On the other hand, the Midnapur Zamindary Company, in spite of having an efficient management, was riddled with disputes caused by a combination of ruthless exploitation and impersonal ownership. On the whole, then, Midnapur zamindars were able to offset some of their objective weaknesses through a policy of personalised paternalism.

Thus if there was a certain erosion of powers still the zamindari system it must be borne in mind, remained based on the extraction of what Marx called the 'absolute rent' which went hand-in-hand with the political and ideological subordination of the producers to the non-producers.[18] The extent of this subordination was determined by political might locally. By the beginning of the 20th century, the zamindars still retained enough political hegemony in the countryside to enforce the payment of abwabs or illegal cesses from the smaller tenants. Abwabs did not have any degree of uniformity and depended strictly on local customs and the ability of each zamindar to enforce his claim. For transfer of holdings, the tenant had to pay a selami which could mount up to a quarter or half the value of a transaction, selami would also have to be paid when any issue of inheritance was involved or when a new ryot or bargadar was being settled. For merely approaching the zamindari kutchery, the peasant would have to pay a cess called nazar to the gomastha or zamindar or both. Besides selami and nazar, there were often the more esoteric varieties of abwabs depending on local custom. Often where the zamindar was strong and the peasant weak an unfortunate victim could be illegally detained for days in the kutchery or even beaten up by the lathial retainers of

17. Final Report 1911-17, p.167-68
18. Barry Hindes and Paul Hirst, Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production London 1977, pp. 183-93.

the zamindar. Though the sufferers from these cruder forms of coercion were invariably the poorer ryots and bhagchasis,[19] in fact, the ability of the zamindar to keep effective control over his domains did depend in a small way on his ability to threaten or make selective use of strong arm tactics. The political, legal and ideological subordination of the peasantry was supplemented by the use of force.

Jotedars and Ryots

Landed property in itself yields no value independently of definite relations of production. The mere legal ownership of land by the non-producers does not in itself guarantee the extraction of surplus from the producers in the form of ground-rent. Without the operation of additional factors (provision of loans for seed being an example in India), the direct producers are under no economic compulsion to render the payment of rent, since they have effective possession of the means of their own reproduction. The payment of rent to zamindars usually implies the existence of an extra economic mechanism for the subordination of the actual cultivator.[20] The mere existence of the state in Bengal, especially Midnapur, was inadequate for this function. An extensive bureaucracy of the Raj had not as yet interposed itself between the ryot and the zamindar. Neither was there an institution which, like the Church in medieval Europe, not only served as a bureaucracy, but also secured the ideological capitulation of the peasantry to the feudal nobility.[21] Zamindars did not possess private armies to enforce the payment of rent. Nor for that matter did they keep all their land under direct scrutiny; the Settlement Report of 1917 estimated that only 10.52% of the agricultural land was in direct possession of the zamindars, and this figure was in fact rather inflated, as it took into account all unoccupied land, jungle, roads, embankments and waste land.[22] Moreover, the holdings of zamindars were not always concentrated around a single geographical area, a factor which made

19. Rajat Ray, Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal: 1875-1908, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Univ. of Cambridge 1972.
20. Hindess and Hirst, op. cit. p.190.
21. Perry Anderson, Lineages of the Absolutist State. London 1979 p.47.
22. Final Report 1911-17, p.65.
23. Rev-Wards XXI,11 (141) 1924-25 (MRR).

direct supervision an expensive and difficult proposition. For example, Jatindranath Mullick, an average medium-sized zamindar, had lands in thanas Kharegpur, Debra, Moyna, Daspur, Midnapur, Naraingarh, Bhagwanpur, Patashpur, Dantan and Binpur.[23] The dispersed nature of the zamindaris meant that zamindars were compelled to make alliances with influential men at the local village level to ensure the smooth collection of rent. Harmonious relations with their tenants, especially the more prosperous ones, was a necessary part of zamindari management.[24]

Thus it was an oversimplification to say the least, to assume that rural society in Bengal was divided into two clear categories, with a parasitic zamindar at the top, and an impoverished 'peasantry' and a body of landless labourers at the bottom. Between these two categories existed an intermediate stratum of non-zamindar tenure-holders with varying degrees of income and influence. Unlike certain East Bengal districts such as Bakarganj, where there often existed twenty-two different intermediaries between the zamindar and the actual cultivator the land tenure system in Midnapur was relatively simple. Except in Garbetta, there was rarely more than one, or at most two, intermediaries between the cultivator and the zamindar.[25] In fact 66% of the land was held, in 1911, by ryots who had security of tenure, who took some personal part in cultivation and who paid rent directly to the zamindar, or government in the case of the Khas Mahals.[26] This figure should not suggest that the Midnapur agriculturalists were essentially a body of peasant proprieters corresponding to the Leninist category of 'middle peasants'. The tenure-holders or jotedars, as they were often called, did let out sections of their holdings to under-ryots or to bhagchasis (share croppers) who were tenants-at-will and consequently had no rights under the law. Therefore, they often combined the dual roles of producer and exploiter.

24. This point is also made in the context of Uttar Pradesh by Peter Musgrave, 'Landlords and Lords of the Land: Estate Management and Social Control in Uttar Pradesh 1860-1920' MAS V1,3,1975. pp. 267-75.
25. Final Report 1911-17, p.37-9.
26. Ibid, p.65. Also W.W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal Vol. 3. London 1876 (reprint Delhi 1973) p.83, estimates that 96% of the ryots in Midnapur had tenure and only 4% were tenants-at-will. Hunter's high estimates cannot be substantiated by later surveys.

The use of the term jotedar has recently been brought into question by certain writers. While Eric Stokes has dismissed it as a force "of modern political slogan-mongering"[27] Andre Beteille has questioned it on the basis of local variations of meaning plus the fact that it covers a whole variety of people with differing economic resources.[28] To begin with, it has to be recognised that the use of the term (meaning literally, one who possesses his own jots or holding) was not prevalent in all parts pf Midnapur. In Jhargram and the Jungle Mahals the term mandal was prevalent, while in areas of Contai the term ayamdar was used. The Settlement Report of 1917 uses the term patnidar to describe the same catagory of persons. But jotedar could have been used in all these instances without any loss of meaning.

This leads us to Béteille's second criticism. The Settlement Report of 1917, while acknowledging that 66.08% of the land was held by secure recognised ryots, also added a further 19.98% under the category 'tenure holders', though the differences between the two categories was not elaborated.[29] In all probability, the Settlement Report was attempting to draw a legalistic distinction without taking into account the relations of production. Such legalism was also apparent in the pronouncements of early Indian Marxists who saw the central contradiction as that stemming out of a conflict between a monolithic peasantry and landlordism.[30] Béteille too is obsessed by legal categories which lump large and small tenants into one category. In this work, legal categories have been largely ignored. Therefore, the term jotedar is taken not in its literal, but in its colloquial sense, as applying to people whose standing was principally due to their combining a position as tenants of the zamindar or government with sub-landlordism over under-ryots and/or bhagchasis. The categorisation becomes clearer in Midnapur after the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 granted franchise to tenants on the basis of wealth. The term ryot will be used to denote that section of the tenants who derived their main source of income from actual cultivation rather than sub-landlordism.[31]

27. Stokes, op.cit. p.286.
28. A Béteille, Studies in Agrarian Social Structure, Oxford 1974, ch.4.
29. Final Report 1911-17, p.65.
30. Sunil Sen, Agrarian Struggles in Bengal, p.75-6.
31. A similar methodology has been used by Hamza Alavi to distinguish between 'rich peasants' and 'poor peasants'. 'Peasants and Revolution' in K. Gough and H. Sharma, ed. Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia', New York, 1973 pp.291-337.

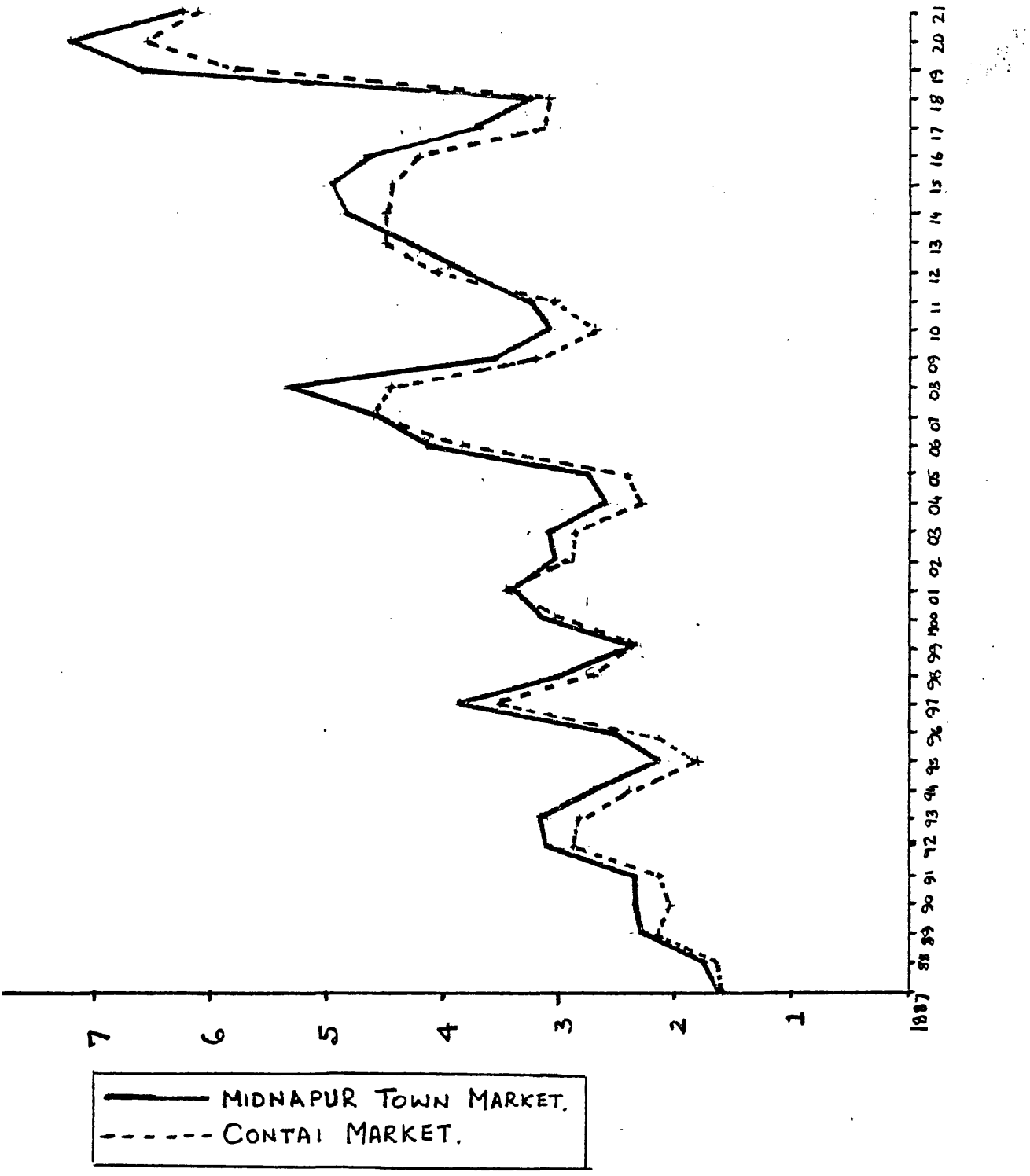
The influence of the jotedar in rural society in the 20th century was a result of the shifts in the colonial economy and changes in the property laws of Bengal. For the jotedar rent was an important source of income. To that extent, he benefited from the rent control legislation which imposed checks on the ability of the zamindar to push rents up arbitrarily but which did not apply to under-tenants. More than other groups, he benefited from price rises; between 1887 and 1911, the price of rice in Midnapur registered several fluctuations with sharp and dramatic increases in 1905-8 and 1919-21 (See table 3:1)[32] The rent collected by the zamindars rose in step with and not out of proportion to the increased value of the produce. Karunamoy Mukherjee estimates that in Midnapur, rent as a percentage of the gross value of produce per acre fell from 11% in 1901, to 10% in 1939.[33] In 1919, a survey conducted by the government in an area of 176 acres around Kharagpur revealed that the net profit of the tenant, deducting all costs (including rent) was an average of Rs. 7-8-0 per acre while the average zamindari rent ranged from Rs. 4 to Rs. 4-8.0 per acre.[34] The advantage was even more apparent in the case of Khas Mahal tenants who not only had to pay an extremely low rent of Rs. 1-3-5 per acre, but also were spared the irritation of the arbitrary abwabs exacted by other zamindars.[35] Therefore, it can be argued that, after the turn of the century, rents did not rise and indeed declined in comparison with value of produce, for those who had tenure. As noted above, the statutory restrictions prevented only zamindars from increasing rents beyond a certain point, indeed the law did not recognise the existence of the under-ryots or bhagchasis until after 1937. Jotedars were thus free (at least in law) to practice the most exploitative forms of sub-landlordism.

A related feature that needs to be remarked in this context is the growing unwillingness of tenants to pay any rent at all. Rajat Ray has calculated that even estates under the more efficient Courts of Wards, collection of rents between 1887 and 1922 never exceeded 62.34%.

32. Department of Land Records, Bengal, Average Price of Staple Food Crop (Rice) in Bengal, from 1887 to date. Calcutta 1924.
33. K. Mukherjee, 'Rents and Forms of Tenancy in Birbhum since the Permanent Settlement' IESHR, XIV,3,1977 also see B.B.Chaudhury, Movement of Rent in Eastern India 1793-1830. Indian Historical Review III, 2, 1977.
34. Land Acquisition IV/2(b)/1919-20 (MRR).
35. BLC Progs XXXVII, July-August 1931, pp. 479-81.

Table 3:1

Average Prices of Rice (per maund) in Midnapur Markets 1887-1921



Source : Department of Land Records , Bengal , Average Prices of Staple Food Crop (Rice) in Bengal From 1887 to Date ,Calcutta 1924 .

of the demand. In fact, after 1907, the collections never exceeded 50%.[36] An exasperated Commissioner wrote to the Manager of the Basudevpur Estate in 1925: "The percentage of current collection on current demand is 25.6 which is very unsatisfactory and is far below the prescribed standard of 90%".[37] While for the poor tenants this phenomenon can be explained by their general poverty, in the case of jotedars, it showed a propensity, in the face of legal difficulties of eviction, to convert ordinary capital into usurious capital. Of course, it was the efficiency or otherwise of the individual zamindari and the relative strength of jotedars and ryots which either promoted or kept in check this trend.

For the mass of under-ryots and bhagchasis, the situation did not lend itself to much hope. Without any statutory protection or any independent organisation to safeguard their interests, they were at the mercy of their superior landlord. For the bhagchasis the surrender of 50-60% of the harvested crop to the tenure-holder represented an appropriation of most of the surplus and consequently meant their exclusion from the benefits of any price rise. The under-ryots' position was only marginally better. The tendency of rent not to rise among tenure-holders did not extend down the rungs of rural stratification. In 1940, the Floud Commission calculated that the average incidence of cash rents per acre was Rs. 3.88 on ryoti lands and Rs. 6.25 on under-ryoti lands.[38] In Midnapur, where sanja (produce) rent was quite prevalent the situation was indeed worse.[39] A study of the neighbouring Birbhum district also shows that price rises did not benefit the peasantry as a 'whole' but only the tenure-holders, and especially jotedars who had the maximum disposable surplus, whether acquired from their own cultivation or acquired as rent.[40]

The jotedar further consolidated his hold on rural society through his control over credit and marketing operations. On the basis of

36. Rajat Ray, Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, Ch.2.
37. Wards XX, 12/1925 (MRR).
38. K. Mukherjee, op.cit.
39. Sumil Sen, op.cit. p.10.
40. K. Mukherjee, op.cit.

the 1921 Census, the Bengal Provincial Banking Commission estimated the number of professional moneylenders or mahajans per lakh of population as:[41]

Burdwan	40	Midnapur	27
Bankura	26	Hoogly	104
Birbhum	30	Howrah	80

It is evident that this relative paucity of professionals in Midnapur did not result from any lack of moneylending. Local officers in the large and populous Sadar thana estimated that in the 1900's there were only 5 mahajans with capital of over Rs 50,000.[42] Yet in 1917, Jameson estimated indebtedness at Rs. 2-4-0 per head of the agricultural population, which amounted to 4.7% of the agricultural production.[43] From all accounts, this estimate was inaccurate and underplayed rural indebtedness. Evidence before the Banking Commission put the indebtedness of Tamluk subdivision alone at over Rs. 26 lakhs or Rs. 4,132 per head of the population.[44] Whatever the actual figure of indebtedness may have been, it is apparent that the professional mahajans were incapable, by themselves, of meeting the demand, and that the bulk of the rural credit was provided by the jotedars and occasionally the zamindars.[45] In fact, the local press often used the terms jotedar and mahajan synonymously.[46]

Most of the credit advanced took the form of unsecured paddy loans at interest ranging from 25% to 50%.[47] It was the problems of general poverty - "an investment in the necessities of life, in the subsistence and reproduction of the agricultural labour force"[48] - which compelled some ryots and other cultivators into negotiating paddy loans on clearly disadvantageous terms. The All India Rural Credit Survey of 1956 discovered that in the Bengal-Bihar area, 89.4% of the cultivators' loans were incurred for family expenditure and only 29% for capital

41. Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Commission Vol. 1, p.195.
42. Ibid, Vol. 2, p.139.
43. Final Report 1911-17, p.112.
44. Banking Enquiry Commission, Vol. 3, pp. 171-3.
45. Ibid Vol. 2 p.148: Vol 1, p.189: Vol. 2 p.800: Vol 2. p.119 Vol 2. p.135.
46. Nihar 30th June 1931.
47. Banking Enquiry Commission, Vol. 2 p.139.
48. Rajat Ray, 'The Crisis of Indian Agriculture 1870-1927, IESHR,X,3, 1973, p.269.

and current expenditure on farms.[49] Moreover, given that Bengal agriculture stagnated in the first half of the century, even 29% was probably too inflated a figure for the latter purposes to be usefully applied in this study. Earlier in the century, by the beginning of the cultivating season in May and June, the smaller cultivators would invariably have run out of capital to sustain their households and to pay for the agricultural labour. The paddy loans were not only used to feed mouths, but part of the paddy was sold at the high-pre-harvest rates to cover other expenditure. The loans were generally repaid in December-January with interest, leaving the cultivator with a reduced saleable surplus and compelling him to seek a new loan in six months time. And so the cycle of dependence continued. As a government report explained: "the conditions are so uncertain that the agriculturalist is often compelled to discount his future income on any terms to relieve present necessity."[50] The jotedar who advanced the loan gained overwhelmingly from the transactions. Not only did he exact a year's interest on what was in reality a six month loan, but given the economic climate of rising prices, he benefited by having at his disposal an even greater saleable surplus.

Cash loans accounted for 10% or less of the debts incurred for purely agricultural purposes.[51] Most of the cash loans were used to meet expenses incurred on special social ceremonies like marriage and sradh. Interest rates were high, starting from 12% and going up to a maximum of 75% compound interest.[52] Over two-thirds of the cash loans were unsecured,[53] which automatically pushed up interest rates and left the interpretation of the terms of credit solely with the money-lender.[54] Although legislation in the form of the Usurious Loans Act of 1918 existed, it was seldom made use of. Privy Council and High Court rulings also stood in the way of statutory restrictions on interest rates. The Courts required proof that the creditor had taken undue advantage of his position to dominate the will of the borrower.

49. Ibid, p.269.
50. Banking Enquiry Commission, Vol. 1, p.72.
51. Ibid Vol 2, p.118.
52. Ibid Vol 1, p.198.
53. Ibid Vol 2, p.156.
54. Ibid Vol 2, p.818

The District Judge of Midnapur, T. B. Jameson, admitted that on numerous occasions he had to set aside the rulings of Munsifs in subordinate courts, "as the Munsif concerned has reduced the rate of interest merely on the grounds that he thinks it is excessive. This the law does not allow"[55]

Co-operative Credit Societies set up by well-meaning individuals with the aid of the government, contributed little towards ending the overtly exploitative character of the credit system. Co-operatives flourished mainly in the Khas Mahal areas of Tamluk and Contai with the backing of the landlords and jotedars. In fact, the jotedars manipulated the societies into extending credit to them at relatively low rates of interest. The money was then re-used to extend credit to non-members at much higher rates of interest.[56] In the ultimate analysis, these institutions did little or nothing to break the stranglehold of usury capital in the rural economy and in fact contributed somewhat in strengthening the grip of the jotedar - moneylenders.

To what extent peasant indebtedness resulted in changes in the landholding pattern cannot be measured in accurate terms. In his evidence to the Banking Commission, Jaladhar Ghose, a Circle Officer in the Sadar region observed:

> Those bankers lend out their paddy and money keeping their eyes upon the landed property of the loanee, generally with main object of getting the capital invested swelled by compound interest, and when it is found by the banker that the debts have run too high to get cleared by the loanee, the banker goes to the Civil Court and manages easily to appropriate lands of the loanee by Civil Court decrees.[57]

The Khas Mahal Manager at Contai estimated that as a result of the economic depression of the 1930's, about 10% of the lands passed

55. Ibid Vol 3, p.34.
56. Ibid Vol 3, pp. 146-7
57. Ibid Vol 1, p.141

from the hands of the cultivating ryot.[58] The Floud Commission too noted a 'rapid increase' in the number of bargadars, made up of people who were formerly cultivating ryots[59]. Economic logic argued against the indebted ryot being actually evicted from his plot and replaced by a new tenant. The interest of the superior landlord lay not in evicting the cultivator but in exacting the maximum possible surplus from him. This was done by taking resources to the law courts and changing the status of the cultivator from recognised ryot to unprotected bargadar or bhagchasi. From all indications and from Kisan Sabha reports, it was the jotedars who gained most from this process of land alienation.[60] Politically, the process did not lead to any significant unrest until the Tebhaga movement of 1946-47, but this was due to the lack of an independent organisation of the bargadars and the neutralising effect of the jotedars' local presence.

In addition to credit, the jotedars maintained a tight rein on the marketing of agricultural produce in Midnapur. Midnapur was a rice exporting region. The livelihood of the rural population depended on the ability to command adequate prices for the produce. But, as we have noted earlier, the smaller cultivators had to part with a considerable section of their surplus to meet their liabilities. This left them with inadequate surplus or no surplus at all. Under such circumstances, it was the pressing need for cash to survive that determined their selling pattern. Although prices were at their lowest at the period immediately following harvesting, the indebted cultivator did not have adequate resources to hold out for the six months when prices would rise again.[61] This only the jotedars could do, having adequate agricultural surplus to await the most favourable market conditions. The small cultivator was also hampered by the lack of means for, or the expenses involved in, transporting the grain to the railway ports from where it was despatched to Calcutta. This meant that he was compelled to sell to the middleman at his village, who often happened to be the

58. Ibid, Vol 3, p.176.
59. Sunil Sen, op.cit, p.7-8
60. Ibid, p.8
61. Banking Enquiry Commission Vol 2, p.130.

jotedar, or to the merchant paikars (wholesalers) at the local hâths. A government report estimated that the difference in prices between the terminal markets and the village hâths was often as much as four annas per maund.[62] For those cultivators who could set aside some grain to sell when favourable market conditions prevailed, storing grain was a major problem. The only khamars were owned by the jotedars and the cultivator storing his grain there had to run the risk of the jotedar expropriating more than what was legitimately his.[63]

British imperialism and its policies played a part in producing the utter stagnation which characterised the agriculture of the whole of Bengal,[64] while the raison d'etre of the zamindari system was the regular payment of land revenue to the colonial government without the benefits of subsequent feedback.[65] But this system of colonial exploitation was reinforced and complemented by an indigenous exploitation based on the inequalities in land, the monopolies of rural credit, and the conditions of marketing. In this latter system, the jotedar played a pre-eminent role. But the intricacies of the zamindari system and of revenue collection removed the jotedar from direct contact with the state machinery. The jotedar (except in Khas Mahals) was not responsible to the state in any significant way. Being categorised in law as tenure-holding ryots, the jotedars retained maximum manoeuvreability, which reinforced by economic strength, enabled them to be de-facto leaders of rural society.

The Mahishya Caste Movement

The economic divisions within rural society established the contours of class in Midnapur. But the existence of class divisions does not in itself guarantee political action on independent class lines,

62. Report of the Bengal Paddy and Rice Enquiry Committee, Alipore 1940, Vol 1, p.55.
63. Hare Krishna Konar, Agrarian Problems of India, Calcutta 1977 pp. 20-1.
64. Rajat Ray, op.cit IESHR X,3,1973.
65. It was calculated by Anil Seal that after taking into account all those heads which were even marginal to agriculture - famine relief, irrigation, railways etc - the Government of Bengal's expenditure for 1902-3 formed only 14.55% of the annual budget ibid p.244.

especially among peasants. In the context of 19th century France, Marx observed:

> The small peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions, but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another, instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse.[66]

This objective isolation serves to make the political organisation among peasants on a class basis a relatively difficult proposition. Peasant analysts have consequently noted the prevalence of 'false consciousness' among the peasantry[67] and the tendency of poor peasants to identify 'upwards' with the richer peasant strata, rather than 'outwards'[68]. In Midnapur, in spite of the objective contradictions that existed between the zamindars, jotedars, raiyats and bhagchasis, the district witnessed a massive participation in the Gandhian movements which brought together the entire 'peasant community' in opposition to the British rule. One of the most significant factors which cemented these forces was caste.

A peculiarity of Midnapur was the numerical preponderence of people belonging to the Mahishya caste. The Mahishyas claimed their origin from the union of a Kshatriya male and a Vaishya female.[69] Although in neighbouring Orissa they were regarded as Kshatriyas and had once formed the bulk of the peasant militia, the rigid Kulinism of Bengal forced them into the category of Sudras. They were considered as an 'unclean' caste and consequently not permitted to serve water to members of higher castes.[70] Predominantly an agricultural caste, they constituted the bulk of the landholders and cultivators of Midnapur, especially in the southern region of the district. In 1896, the President of the college of Nadia pundits placed the Mahishyas into

66. Karl Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' Selected Works Vol 2, p.414.
67. John S. Saul, The Dialectic of Class and Tribe, Race and Class XX,4,1979.
68. Nigel Harris in Nigel Harris and Malcolm Caldwell 'Debate on the Revolutionary Peasants', International Socialism 41 1969-70,p.20.
69. N.K.Dutt, Origin and Growth of Caste in India, Vol. 2 Calcutta '69 p.129
70. Pandit Nilkanta Das, Kaivartas of Bengal. Advance 5th September 1931.

the category of the local aristocracy of Midnapur: 'In the Tamluk and Contai sub-divisions of the Midnapur district, where the number of high caste Brahmins and Kayasthas is very small, the Kaibartas (Mahishyas) may be said to form the upper layer of the population. A great many of them are zamindars and holders of substantial tenures'[71] As such, their social position in Hindu society was not commensurate with their economic position. Moreover, being numerically preponderent and economically dominant in Midnapur, and in the absence of other strong caste groups, they thrived in an atmosphere free of caste antagonism and confrontation. There "was no solid community either above them exercising power or below them nursing resentment"[72] The Mahishya caste embraced a cross-section of all classes in Midnapur.

Till the end of the 19th century, there was no formal, regional caste association. The jatis were organised at the village level into samajes with a samajpati at the head. Samajpatis tended to come from the zamindar or old aristocratic families and mediated in social disputes involving members of the caste. The problems of caste were considered an internal matter of the local samajes and no need was felt for the formation of any supralocal body co-ordinating the work of the samajes within a caste. When communication became imperative, as in the case of arranging marriages, the role was taken up by ghataks who put families in touch with one another in return for a commission. All in all, except for the three upper castes (Brahmins, Kayasthas and Vaidyas) who were conscious of their superior position in society, there was an absence of any aggressive caste spirit among the lower castes, including the Mahishyas.

It was the 1901 Census which triggered off an outbreak of casteism among the Hindu population of Bengal. At the time of the Census, the government submitted for public discussion Sir Herbert Risley's elaborate list of caste precedence. The result was a proliferation of caste associations organised on the lines of modern pressure groups and the

71. Rajat Ray, Political Conflict and Social Unrest in Bengal, pp. 241-2.
72. Ibid, p.241.

TABLE 3:2

Mahishya Population in Midnapur

	Total Population	Mahishyas	Percentage
Sadar	860,622	145,836	16.94
Jhargram	389,130	7,436	1.91
Ghatal	273,308	96,701	35.38
Tamluk	643,157	353,544	54.97
Contai	632,876	279,848	44.21
Total	2,799,093	883,367	31.56

(Source: Bengal District Gazetteer B. Volume, Midnapur District Statistics 1921-22 to 1930, Calcutta 1933, pp.2-3)

publication of a mass of caste literature. This should not be taken to mean that the outbreak of casteism was a totally artificial phenomenon instigated by the government for mischievous ends. True, the idea of caste precedence arose from the particular conceptions of Indian society held by colonial administrators,[73] but at least among the Mahishyas of Bengal there was some material basis to the new-found interest in caste. Not only were the Mahishyas of Midnapur the leading community of the district, but their wealth had granted them access to English education. In the neighbouring 24 Parganas, they comprised the bulk of the lathdar landholders of the Sunderbans. In Nadia, they formed the lower middle class and some had enriched themselves by serving as sarkars to the European indigo planters. In Calcutta and Howrah, there was a large Mahishya population functioning as traders, manufacturers and lawyers.[74] Their important role in various parts of Bengal in no way measured up to the low social status accorded to them by the caste rules of Hindu society. It might not be an exaggeration to claim that even without Risley's instigation, a form of caste 'self-respect' movement would have arisen among the Mahishyas. The Census of 1901 merely provided the occasion for its expression.

Before 1921, the Mahishyas were not recognised by the government as a separate caste, but were lumped together with the Jalia Kaibartas as the Kaibarta caste. In 1897-98, a Midnapur zamindar convened a conference of the Chasi Kaibartas (Mahishyas) which determined that they were the Mahishya caste mentioned in the shastras. A body calling itself the Jati Nirdharani Sabha was established which received financial backing from the wealthy landholders in Midnapur as well as the other prosperous Mahishyas outside. This group, which determined that the caste should call itself Mahishyas, came into conflict with the orthodox members of the caste, led by samajpatis, which was in favour of the Vaishya status for the caste. But the samajpatis, comprising in the main of the scions of old and declining families, did not command enough influence to win their orthodox position over the heads of the more energetic and wealthy Mahishya camp. The caste members from outside Midnapur seem to have

73. Lucy Carrol Stout, 'Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s) Associations' unpublished seminar paper. Institute of Commonwealth Studies.
74. Rajat Ray op.cit, p.242.

played a leading role in the campaign to advocate Mahishya status. Being in a minority and facing professional competition from the members of the upper caste groups, they were more keen to achieve higher ritual status then some of their caste counterparts in Midnapur who were conscious of themselves as the dominant caste in the district. In 1900, the leading members of the caste from all over Bengal assembled in Calcutta to form the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti and requested the government to demarcate them from the Jalia Kaibartas and recognise them as Mahishyas.[75] Among those active in the formation of the Mahishya Samaj were Trailokyanath Biswas of the Janbazar family of Rani Rashmoni; Mahendranath Ray, Prakash Chandra Sarkar, and Ananta Ram Das, lawyers in the Calcutta High Court: Mahendranath Halder, editor of Sevika, Ishan Chandra Ray, pleasder of Gaya; and Shashi Bhusan Biswas, zamindar;[76] a clear majority from outside Midnapur. However, the formation of the Bangiya Mahishya Samity provided the impetus for the formation of local Mahishya Samities in Midnapur.

As in the central body, the leadership of the local Mahishya Samities in Midnapur was firmly in the hands of the more prosperous or educated sections of the caste. Of the 19 delegates from Midnapur to the 1918-19 (1325 B.S.) session of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti, eight were lawyers, one a doctor and five zamindars or jotedars.[77] They included Mahendranath Maity, the leader of the Tamluk bar, Upendra Nath Maity, President of the Midnapur town bar and Chairman of the Midnapur municipality, Sarat Chandra Jana, a leading lawyer in the District Court, and Pratap Chandra Sasmal and Devendranath Hazra, zamindars active in public life. B.N.Sasmal was elected the President for the 1920-21 session of the Samiti.[78] In fact, nearly all of those Mahishyas involved in the secular politics of Midnapur, were also active in the Mahishya caste movement.

Though the main function of the Bangiya Mahishya Samiti was to campaign

75. Mahishya Samaj, X, 7-8, (1327 B.S.), p.56.
76. Rajat Ray, op.cit, p.243.
77. Mahishya Samaj VIII, 3, (1326 B.S.) p.91.
78. Ibid, X,9, (1327 B.S.) pp.57-62.

for the government recognition of Mahishyas as a separate caste, the movement also devoted its energies towards reinforcing the change from Kaibartas to Mahishyas. This meant above all, attempts to change the ritual habits of the caste members - a form of sanskritisation Previously the Chasi Kaibartas had observed mash ashauch or a month of mourning for their dead. The Mahishya Samiti determined that as Mahishyas, they would now observe pakshashauch or a fifteen day mourning as proof of their higher ritual standing in society. Brahmin allies were secured who backed this change with the aid of lengthy quotes from the shastras. Caste campaigners like Pratap Chandra Sasmal, the zamindar of Kalindi, and Ashutosh Jana, an agricultural scientist living in Birulia, toured the villages of Midnapur to explain this change to the Mahishyas. When deviations occurred, as when one Mahishya changed from mash ashauch to dash ashauch or ten day mourning prevalent among the upper castes, the activitists rapidly convened a meeting to put people right.[79] But occasionally the Mahisya attempts to change their ritual habits met with Brahmin resistance. In 1924, a group of Brahmins met at the Hari temple in Contai and decided that if the Mahishyas persisted with pakshashauch, they would cease all social contracts with them. But when it came to actually signing their 'fatwa' most of the Brahmins refused. In an area where the Mahishyas were both numerically and economically dominant, Brahmins dared not risk alienating them, even if it meant abandoning the purity of the shastras.[80]

There were other less successful attempts to alter time-worn practices. For instance, some of the Jotedars made attempts to outcaste those Mahishyas who sold their produce in the market themselves. But the poorer caste members declared openly that they could not afford the luxury of hiring servants, and if this was the caste rule, they would prefer to remain Chasi Kaibartas. In fact, the Census Commissioner of 1911 seriously discussed the prospects of a split among Mahishyas - into Mahishyas and Chasi Kaibartas - along economic lines.[81] The jotedars backed down as they could not afford to abandon the leverage of common caste with their cultivators.

79. Ibid, X,9, (1322BS), p.322; Ibid V, 3, (1322BS) p.71.
80. Nihar, 8th July 1924.
81. Rajat Ray, op.cit. p.244-5.

More successful were the attempts to institutionalise marriage rules. In 1916-17 (1323 B.S.), the caste leaders decided that all those Mahishyas who married out of caste will be socially ostracised and lose caste. The ostensible reason cited was the attempts by individuals belonging to other low castes to declare themselves as Mahishyas and thus attain social respectibility. For example, in Dacca district, a Majhi claiming to be a Mahishya managed to get his three sons married to Mahishya girls. When this was discovered the girls and their families were declared outcastes.[82] From the pages of the caste journal it becomes clear that efforts to enforce these marriage regulations came from Mahishyas living in East Bengal and other areas where the caste was in insignificant minority. It points to the desire to get away from their past low-caste identity and reinforce their new Mahishya 'clean caste' identity. Obviously, this could not be done without taking a position of aloofness from other low castes.

It was this trend towards maintaining a distinct and separate identity that made the caste leaders very anxious to prevent other low castes from attaining the status of Mahishyas. During the 1921 Census, the Patnis were anxious to register themselves as Mahishyas and offered a reward of RS 1000 to anyone who could back their claims by reference to the shastras. The result was that the Mahishyas not only launched a campaign to prevent government recognising the claims of the Patnis, but also launched a bitter polemic against members of that caste. The Mahishya Samaj declared that Patnis were just good enough to function as doms, i.e. to burn the dead, and were in fact lower in ritual status than even the Muslims. When certain Brahmin pundits offered to sponsor the Patni's case, the Mahishya Samaj wrote bitterly:

> The Brahmin pundits might be able to uplift the Patnis on paper, but they cannot reward them with maids, bearers and barbers. If the Patnis manage to get themselves recognised as Mahishyas, then arrangements should be made to call a Muchi a Brahmin...The mercenary pundits by giving sanction to the unjustifiedclaims of the Patnis are paving the way for a social revolution.[83]

82. Mahishya Samaj, V1, 12, (1323 BS), pp. 250-1.
83. Ibid, X, 5-6 (1327 BS), pp. 38-41; Ibid X, 1-2, (1327 BS) pp. 4-5.

It is again to be noted that most of the vitriol did not originate in Midnapur.

It becomes clear that Mahishyas living away from Midnapur looked up to the caste movement to promote their separate identity as a 'clean caste' in Hindu society and hence placed great importance on the institutionalisation of marriage regulations. Clearly this was of secondary importance to Mahishyas living in Midnapur, where their dominant position made it difficult for other castes to look down on them. Therefore the 'clean caste' issue was not the central thrust of the caste movement in Midnapur. Instead, in a district where the majority of the Mahishyas lived off the land, the caste movement sought to develop an aggressive spirit of 'peasant-pride'. This was necessary as the Kulinism of Bengal had always down-graded the role of manual labour as a lowly occupation. Being a chasha (peasant) was not considered respectable. The caste movement sought to inject a sense of pride among Mahishyas as tillers of the soil. A poem by Gajendra Nath Biswas, in Mahishya Samaj, described chashas as true sons of the soil and called upon them not to accept any humiliation from the urban upper caste Babus.[84] The annual Mahishya Samiti conventions passed resolutions calling upon government to set up model farms and agricultural schools.[85] In 1918, the Viceroy was urged by Prakesh Chandra Sarkar, on behalf of the existing communal electorates:

> That in the interests of the agricultural masses in general to give them a share in the governance of their country is but meet and just, and that every land-owning proprietor without limitation and restriction, every tenure holder, every occupancy ryot, gantidar, actual cultivator of the soil, each of whom has a stake in the land, may possess a right to vote in the election of members in Councils...[86]

What is more significant is the fact that peasant-pride cut across caste barriers and extended to occupational solidarity. Thus while

84. Ibid, V, 3, (1322 BS) pp. 49-50
85. Ibid, X. 9, (1327 BS) pp. 57-62
86. Ibid V111, 6, (1325 BS) pp. 156-7

their caste counterparts in parts of Bengal were engaged in efforts to keep aloof from other low castes, and trying to put them down, Mahishya leaders in Midnapur like Mahendra Nath Karen and Sarat Chandra Jana were holding meetings to promote the cause of another peasant caste - the Namasudras - for respectable status in Hindu society.[87] So deep did this notion of peasant consciousness seep into the Mahishyas that it becomes the accepted political jargon of Midnapur after 1920. During the 1921 elections to the Legislative Council, one candidate for the Tamluk-Contai seat lost all credibility when he referred, in a derogatory way, to Midnapur being a land of chashas (peasants).

Politically, the caste movement was to have important repercussions in Midnapur. It was responsible in fostering a definite caste-peasant identity among the important Mahishya community. This led to the development of the idyllic notion of an all-embracing 'peasant community' which served to conceal and undermine the horizontal differentiations in rural society. In effect, caste along with the harsh realities of the agrarian economy served to reinforce the position of the jotedars and some zamindars as 'leaders' of society in Midnapur.

87. Nihar 15th June 1920.

Political Change In Midnapur 1907-19

Between 1907 and 1919, the politics of Bengal underwent a rapid and radical transformation. In 1907, the Moderates lost ground rapidly to the forces of militant Hindu nationalism, and in 1919, Bengal was to witness the first signs of mass nationalist politics under the banner of Gandhi and the Khilafat. Yet, this transformation was by no means linear and the period witnessed varying degrees of uneven political development. In this chapter, we examine the process of political change in Midnapur district and in particular chart the development of four different movements that had some impact on the political life of the district.

The Terrorist Movement in Midnapur

The partition of Bengal in 1905 had a profound effect on the bulk of the Bengali Hindus. It was widely held that the partition was a Machiavellian device to divide the Bengali nation and its nationalism. Almost the entire Bengali bhadrolok united in their resolve to defeat this measure. The Maharajas of Bengal and the zamindars, noted for their loyalism, now joined hands with the articulate lawyers and other professionals to initiate the Swadeshi movement aimed at crippling British power politically and economically. The movement accuired a dimension of high religious intensity, and a unique popular culture sprang up to complement a political movement.

The Swadeshi Movement really got off the ground in Calcutta and East Bengal where the partition threatened the entrenched vested interests of the bhadrolok minority.[1] The movement did not reach such a high intensity in Midnapur which, being located in West Bengal was less adversely affected by the partition. But emotional solidarity with fellow-Bengalis in the East resulted in a conference on 7th August 1905, at the Belley Hall in Midnapur town, which was attended by at least a thousand students. The Conference took a vow "that so long as the

1. Gordon Johnson, 'Partition, Agitation and Congress: Bengal 1904-1908' in Gallagher, Johnson and Seal, ed. Locality Province and Nation, Cambridge 1973, pp. 213-30.

partition remained they would not participate (in) any public amusement and would not accept any foreign goods". A volunteer organisation led by Satyendra Nath Bose came into existence in the district to organise picketing operations. On 2nd September 1905, the day after partition was officially announced, the students organised a day of mourning and paraded barefoot around Midnapur town.[2] On 25th September 1905, a public meeting was organised in Midnapur town which attracted a crowd of 10,000 people, and on 1st November 1905 another meeting was organised at Swan Saheber hath by the Mahant Maharaja of Chandrakona.[3] But although the entire body of notables in Midnapur were united in opposition to the partition, action between 1905 and 1906 remained confined to the holding of ritualistic meetings of protest. The boycott movement which had proved to be quite effective in East Bengal was not taken up in Midnapur in any organised way until 1907.

But by 1907, the political climate of Bengal was changing rapidly. Thanks to government intransigence on the partition issue and the apparent ineffectiveness of 'mendicancy', the Moderates within the Bengali nationalist movement began to lose ground rapidly to the Extremists, who were encouraged by the thundering oratory of Bepin Chandra Pal coupled with the emotive religio-nationalism propagated by Aurobindo Ghose in the pages of Bande Mataram. In Midnapur, this trend was accompanied by attempts by the Extremists to revitalise the Congress and take it out of the hands of the followers of Surendranath Bannerji, notably the Barrister K. B. Dutt. Matters came to a head in December 1907 at the Midnapur District Conference where the Extremist faction led by the lawyer Trailakyanath Paul and egged on by Aurobindo Ghose successfully disrupted K. B. Dutt's Presidential address and accused the Moderates of using the presence of the Superintendant of Police at the Conference to prevent the Extremists from speaking out.[4] This conference was accompanied by a virtual split in the Midnapur nationalist movement, with the Moderates more or less opting out of active participation.

As a result of the Moderate-Extremist conflict, incidents of picketing and boycott became far more widespread in Midnapur in 1907 and 1908. At

2. N. N. Das, History of Midnapur Part II, Calcutta 1962, p.45.
3. Ibid, pp. 50-2.
4. Ibid, pp. 54-6, and GOI H. Poll (B), January 1908, No.23.

the Sitalda Mohodudra Mela, a printed notice was circulated that those who offered Swadeshi articles for sale would be honoured and not taxed while those that bought or sold foreign goods would be insulted and made to pay a tax of Rs 1 - 4.[5] Two Swadeshi shops were opened at Mahisadal and the lawyers of Tamluk floated a 'Trades Union Company' and attempted to sell shares at Rs 10 each.[6] At Mahisadal a Sebak Samiti was formed whose members went from house to house to compile a list of all people who used foreign goods.[7] But even though picketing was stepped up and many Swadeshi ventures initiated, the movement did not have any significant impact on the political life of the district. In fact, if government reports are to be believed, shopkeepers in Midnapur were hostile to the picketers and physical confrontations between both sides were frequent.[8]

The failure of the Swadeshi movement to attract any audience beyond the students, nationalist lawyers and some zamindars is not hard to explain. The Swadeshi movement was essentially a movement to seek the repeal of the partition of Bengal and it appealed to Bengalis on an emotional level. In Midnapur, where the overwhelming majority of the population was rural with little contact with the metropolis, this form of nationalism was too abstract to convert to political reality. Moreover, Midnapur being in West Bengal was not affected in any way by the partition, nor was there any danger of the district being overweighed by the political emergence of the Muslims - the factor that determined the political behaviour of the bhadrolok population in East Bengal. It was the failure of the Swadeshi movement to find roots in the district that signalled the development of 'secret societies' committed to terrorism as the form of political action.

Secret societies in Midnapur dated back to 1902 when a society was established by Hemchandra Kanungo and Gnanendranath Bose. In that year, the group which consisted of 7 to 8 members made links with the Anusilan Samity of Calcutta set up by Barin and Aurobindo Ghose. Aurobindo despatched Jatindranath Bannerji to Midnapur at the end of the year following which Aurobindo and Barin visited the district. There they recruited Hemchandra and some others directly into the Anusilan Samity

5. GOI H. Poll (B) May 1908, No. 38.
6. GOI H. Poll (B) October 1907, No. 41.
7. GOI H. Poll (B) October 1907 No. 57.
8. GOI H. Poll (B) October 1907 No 8 and No 85.

by making them swear on the Gita and a sword. In 1903, Sister Nivedita, a close disciple of Swami Vivekananda, visited Midnapur town as a guest of Hemchandra and inaugurated the first physical-fitness akhra in the district. Later that year Bhupendranath Dutta, the brother of Vivekananda and himself an advocate of militant Hindu nationalism, visited Midnapur to make further contacts with the groups.[9]

But before the groups in Midnapur could begin to operate with any effectiveness, they were plagued with splits and factionalism. A few members of Hemchandra's group broke away after some members fell out with one another over a lady.[10] Later, Hemchandra along with Barin broke away from the parent Anusilan group in Calcutta because of its preoccupation with non-political social work.[11] But Barin's arrogance and high-handedness led to strains between the small Calcutta and Midnapur groups, though there is no evidence to suggest any formal severing of links.[12] In short, the early history of secret societies in Midnapur was "a history of party factionalism, poisoned by mutual distrust, bitterness and egoism..."[13]

The beginnings of the Swadeshi movement led to an increase in the number of akhras in Midnapur. According to Police reports, four akhras were started in Midnapur town alone which, as suggested by their names, (Sakti Samiti, Swadeshi Samiti, Santan Samiti and Basanta Malati Akhra), clearly had political objectives tempered by the then-fashionable religious nationalism.[14] In Contai the akhras were given a large measure of financial support by the zamindars, especially Digambar Nanda of Mugberia who allowed them to use an isolated part of his zamindari for arms training.[15] In 1906, the Midnapur Zamindari Society and especially Raja Narendralal Khan of Narajole helped raise funds to send Hemchandra Kanungo to Paris to learn the art of bomb-making.[16] Moreover, the Anusilan Samiti in Calcutta used Khudiram Bose, a youth trained in the akhras of Midnapur in the abortive attempt in Muzaffarpur in 1908 on the life of Mr. Kingsford, the Presidency Magistrate.[17] However, the fact remains that none of the Midnapur groups actively organised any acts of political terrorism; their activities remained confined to body-building drills and optimistically hoping for the formation of what they conceived as the 'revolutionary party.'

9. Benoyjiban Ghose, Agnijuger Astraguru Hemchandra, Calcutta 1962, pp. 34-5, 48.
10. Ibid, pp. 43-4.
11. Ibid, p.39 and Samaren Roy, The Restless Brahmin, Calcutta 1970, pp11-12.
12. Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, Delhi, p.480. There is however little to support Sarkar's claim that Hemchandra was then repelled by Barin's obsession with religion. One of the first acts of

On December 6th 1907, an attempt was made to blow up the train in which Sir Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, was travelling, some miles from Kharagpur. Though no evidence could be found to connect any of the Midnapur groups to this act, police surveillance in the district increased dramatically. Two police officers - Lalmohan Guha and Mazharul Huq - were delegated the task of unearthing the 'terrorist conspiracy' that the government imagined was being organised in Midnapur.

The period also coincided with the appointment of Donald Weston as Collector in Midnapur. Weston had previously earned notoriety in the nationalist circles of Bengal for exonerating some police officers for their behaviour in the Calcutta Swadeshi riots.[18] On his arrival in Midnapur, he began a personal vendetta with Raja Narendralal Khan, the zamindar of Narajole and a Swadeshi sympathiser. In 1907, he excluded the Raja from the Khas Mulakati List of Midnapur with the comments:

> I find no reason to give him a Khas Mulakat. His manners are very bad, in fact he seems to me to be deficient in intellect. He is said to be a ganja eater, which may account for his apparent idiocy. He has mixed himself up with the Swadeshi party and I have had frequent complaints of boycotting in his elaka (area) encouraged by his local officers.[19]

Weston also brought in punitive police into the district and stationed them at all those thanas where heavy picketing had been noticed. In the Sadar region, to spite the Raja particularly, he made arrangements for the punitive police to be stationed at the Narajole zamindari.[20] Moreover, after Khudiram Bose had been apprehended for his part in the Muzaffarpur incidents, Weston directed the police officers specifically to investigate any alleged complicity of the Raja.[21]

12. the Midnapur group in 1905 after receiving some substantial zamindari donation was to construct a Bhawani Mandir in Midnapur town cf. Benoyjibon Ghose, op.cit., pp. 56-7. Hemchandra's disillusionment with religion must have come at a later date.
13. Benoyjibon Ghose, op.cit, pp. 35-6.
14. GOI H. Poll (B), January 1908, No 117.
15. Benoyjibon Ghose, op. cit., p.53.
16. Ibid, pp. 74-5.
17. Samaren Roy, op.cit., p.48.
18. Diary of Mazharul Huq, 25th May 1908, p.87 (WBSA).
19. GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No.12 (WBSA).
20. Diary of Mazharul Huq, 31st May 1908, p.96.
21. Ibid, 8th May 1908, p.62.

On 9th July 1908, a bomb was discovered in the house of Santosh Das, a discharged probationary Sub-Inspector of Police. On 31st July, another bomb was discovered in the house of the zamindar Barada Prasad Dutt.[22] On the basis of these two finds coupled with the reports of two informers who had been cultivated by the police, the authorities concluded that they had unearthed a huge 'Bomb Conspiracy' in Midnapur aimed at murdering Donald Weston.[23] The CID identified 179 people whom they claimed to be members of the Midnapur Secret Society.[24] However, only 27 persons were actually arrested and charged in the Midnapur Bomb Conspiracy Case. These included Raja Narendralal Khan, Upendra Nath Maity and Debdas Karan the editor of Medini Bandhav. The government indictment listed 22 places where the conspirators had allegedly held secret meetings, which ranged from the Midnapur town house of the Raja of Mahisadal to the houses of two prostitutes.[25] Government officials seriously believed that they had nipped a potential danger in the bud.

The arrest of the so-called conspirators was accompanied by more generalised repression on the population of the district. On the situation in Midnapur town, the Bengalee wrote:

> There is a general sense of insecurity in the town, and we may add throughout the district. People feel that at any moment their houses may be searched and they may be arrested if only they have incurred the displeasure of the police. Rank, wealth and stainless reputation are no guarantees against the degradation of house search or arrest. The general feeling is that the police are masters of the situation and they may do what they please...police rule has been substituted in place of the reign of law...[26]

K. B. Dutt, the Congress barrister, complained to the Commissioner that Midnapur town was living in a state of panic.[27] But these complaints did not receive a sympathetic hearing from the officials. The Chief Secretary, F. W. Duke expressed his total confidence in the "cool and

22. J. C. Ker, Political Troubles in India 1907-1917, Calcutta 1973 pp. 416-17.
23. GOB H. Poll 51 (3)/1909 (WBSA).
24. Note by R. S. Mukherjee, D.S.P., C.I.D. Bengal 24th August 1908. GOB H. Poll 1909, STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL (NMML).
25. Benoyjibon Ghose, op.cit. , p.76
26. Bengalee, 1st September 1908, GOB H.Poll 51/1909 (WBSA).

level headed" approach of Weston.

> The people of Midnapore are themselves entirely responsible for whatever inconvenience they now suffer from the consequences of the unrest in the town.[28]

Neither was repression concentrated in Midnapur town. In Bhagawanpur thana, where the Swadeshi movement had witnessed a relatively high level of picketing against foreign goods, punitive police were stationed, high taxes of Rs 20 to 25 per month were imposed on all 'middle class' households, and in one instance the tax reached astronomical figures of Rs 200 per month on one Jagat Narayan Ray of Kalabaria village.[29] The villagers of Kalabaria were also ordered by the local daroga to provide good food to the police and some were even asked to vacate their homes.[30]

The use of intensive, but selective repression by the authorities had the effect of making the district aware of the realities of the Swadeshi movement. Whereas previously people had remained indifferent to the activities of the nationalists, repression forced people to take sides and heightened their political consciousness. The general repulsion against state repression increased after Sir S. P. Sinha, the Advocate General, informed government that the charges against 24 of the 27 implicated in the Midnapur Bomb Conspiracy Case should be dropped for want of any substantial evidence. The prosecution case seemed remarkably flimsy as it was based on the evidence of two police informers and two men who had criminal records.[31] Nationalist opinion was greatly incensed at what they saw as Weston's vindictive campaign against some notables of the district and they mounted a campaign to discredit him.[32]

After the charges against him had been dropped, Narendralal Khan encouraged Peary Mohan Das, one of those implicated in the Bomb case, to initiate proceedings against Weston. K. B. Dutt, was put in charge of the case and nationalists toured the district raising public

27. GOB H. Poll 51(4)/1909 (WBSA).
28. Note dated 7th August 1908, GOB H. Poll 51(4)/1909. No. 5 (WBSA).
29. Report from Nihar, R.N.P. Bengal 5th June 1909.
30. Nayak 20th May 1909, R.N.P. Bengal, 29th May 1909.
31. Benoyjibon Ghose, op.cit., pp. 77-80.
32. The matter was even raised in the House of Commons by Kier Hardie on 19th November, 1908. GOB H. Poll 7/1909 No. 2 (WBSA).

subscriptions, especially from zamindars.[33] To add to the growing public interest in the Damage Suit against Weston and the Police, Raja Narendralal Khan accused Weston and two police officers of accepting a bribe from him. This accusation clearly embarrassed the government, and on the 16th January, 1909, a Departmental Enquiry was set up to investigate the charges. In April 1909, Weston was relieved from his Midnapur posting but not before government gave him ample opportunity to decide what papers should be sent to the enquiry. Not surprisingly, the Departmental Enquiry completely exonerated Weston and concluded that there was sufficient evidence to show that there was a revolutionary conspiracy afoot in the district.[34] But the government was not so fortunate in the High Court, where Justice Fletcher awarded Peary Mohan Das and others Rs 1,000 in damages. His judgement contained a strong indictment of police methods and the three officers involved in the case.

The High Court victory boosted the morale of the nationalists in Midnapur. The Bengalee reflected the popular euphoria:

> The case was really a fight between the police aided by the resources of an omnipotent bureaucracy and the representatives of the people in one of the most important districts in Bengal. The latter, with limited resources, had law and justice on their side, and they have triumphed.[35]

Along with the judgement the nationalist mounted an effective campaign to ostracise Mazharul Huq and Lalmohan Guha, the two police officers involved in the case, as well as all others who had aided the government. Lalmohan Guha was boycotted by his entire village in Faridpur and no one attended his daughter's annaprasan.[36] K. B. Dutt used his position as Manager of the Jamboni Estate to stop the marriage of the daughter of Akshoy Kumar Pal, a prosecution witness in the Bomb Case.[37] Abinash Malakar, another prosecution witness was socially excommunicated and a

33. GOB H. Poll 51(7)/1909 (NMML).
34. Report of the Results of the Departmental Enquiry held by the Commissioner of the Burdwan Division into the Circumstances of the Midnapore Conspiracy Case, Parts 1 and 2, Calcutta 1909 and GOB H. Poll 7/1909 (WBSA).
35. Bengalee 8th August 1911, R.N.P. Bengal 12th August 1911.
36. GOB H. Poll 51/1909 No. 22 (WBSA).
37. F. W. Duke to Daly, 7th October 1909, GOB H. Poll 51(C)/1909 (NMML).

case of rape was brought against him by people from his village. Dr. Bankim Chandra Mukherji of Midnapur town was boycotted by his Hindu patients after he refused to testify for the defence, so much so that his monthly earnings dropped from Rs 500 to Rs 20.[38] The government had succeeded in making a non-existent political movement into an actual reality.

Undeterred by their failure in the High Court, the government promptly appealed. This time Justice Woodroffe overturned the earlier decision and cleared Weston and the other two officers. But instead of boosting the image of the government, the new verdict raised new questions regarding the 'impartiality' of the courts. According to the Amrita Bazar Patrika:

> The sophistry of Justice Woodroffe and his philippic against Mr. Justice Fletcher will not alter the facts of Midnapore, especially the fact that a great deal of unnecessary oppression (Mr. Woodroffe calls it excessive vigour) was exercised against a harmless and inoffensive and terror-stricken population in the name of law and order.[39]

The government followed up their latest victory by honouring both Mazharul Huc and Lalmohan Guha with titles.[40] On the whole, the insensitive handling of the situation by the authorities demonstrated to the politically aware sections of the population the growing irreconcilability of Indian and British interests.

The government was not satisfied even after its victory in the Appeal Court. The district authorities now launched a bitter campaign against Raja Narendralal Khan, whose accusations of bribery had contributed significantly to eroding the credibility of the government. Even though the Raja had been cleared by the courts, the District Magistrate refused to have any dealings with him and advised the Europeans in Midnapur to boycott him socially.[41] When George V visited India in 1912, the Raja

38. Report by S. P. Midnapur, 21st September 1909. GOB H. Poll 51(C) /1909 (NMML).
39. Amrita Bazar Patrika 2nd August 1912, RNP Bengal 24th August 1912.
40. RNP Bengal 19th August 1911.
41. GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No. 1-2 (WBSA).

was deliberately excluded from all social functions.[42] The government made it clear to him that there was no question of the government restoring his privileges unless he withdrew all the charges he had made against the police. In fact, certain members of the Governor's Executive Council wanted to deprive the Raja of his title.[43]

The Raja whose flirtations with Swadeshi and terrorism had never been completely serious, was also more than anxious to make his peace with the government. He informed Bradley-Birt, the Collector, that he was willing to sign a statement withdrawing all the charges against Weston.[44] But this did not satisfy the officials. According to F. W. Duke, now a member of the Executive Council:

> The effect of it is merely to transfer the charge of corruption from Mr. Weston to the police. It is immaterial whom the Raja thought he was bribing; he is guilty by his own admission of offering bribe, and until he makes full amends for this, and the other misdemeanours which have been established against him, he is not likely to be recognised by government.[45]

The government wanted the Raja to sign a public apology withdrawing all charges against all the officers and pay a substantial contribution to the municipal waterworks scheme as a precondition of his restoration on the Durbar List.[46] The Raja was most reluctant to withdraw charges against the police officers but was persuaded to do so by the Commissioner.[47] In his apology, the Raja said:

> I was induced to make charges against Mr. Weston and two police officers, of having obtained money from me. I am now satisfied that these charges are without foundation. I withdraw them unreservedly and regret that they were ever brought forward.[48]

The government decided not to publish the text of the apology, but issued

42. Ananda Bazar Patrika 26th December 1912, RNP, Bengal 4th January 1913.
43. GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No 12 (WBSA).
44. Bradley-Birt to Stevenson, 14th April 1912, GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No. 4 (WBSA).
45. Note by F. W. Duke 19th April 1912, GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No. 5 (WBSA).
46. Halifax, Commissioner to Stevenson-Moore, 14th September 1912, GOB

a statement to the newspapers that "Raja Narendra Lal Khan of Narajole has submitted a complete apology to government for his participation in the disloyal movement in Midnapore, and has withdrawn unreservedly all the charges which he made against Government officials in that connection which he is now satisfied were unfounded"[49]

The government had hoped that reconciliation with the Raja of Narajole would "make a favourable impression locally and do much towards strengthening the better feeling that is beginning to prevail"[50] Instead, the apology had the effect of "creating a commotion in the minds of the public"[51] The Indian press interpreted it as a deliberate attempt by the government" to bring discredit on the judgement of Sir Lawrence Jenkins and Sir Ashutosh Mukherji", the judges who had acquitted the Raja in the Bomb Conspiracy trial.[52] The nationalist Ananda Bazar Patrika did not launch into a bitter polemic against the Raja for being a turn-coat; instead it fully appreciated the circumstances which had compelled him to sign an apology. The blame was put on the government for persecuting and harrassing the Raja.

> The Narajole Raja is at the present in serious trouble, and it would seem that even by this presenting an apology his anxieties would not end. May God bless him.[53]

From the government point of view therefore, the apology did not have any significant effect in reducing local political tension or enhancing the credibility of British rule.

The Swadeshi and early terrorist organisations in Midnapur were classic cases of might-have-beens in Bengali nationalist history. They played no direct or significant role in promoting the development of nationalist consciousness in the district. Their influence was always small and distinctly elitist in character. But their mere existence was construed as a danger by the British authorities and hence the crack-down which was

46. H. Poll, 126/1912 No. 5 (WBSA).
47. GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No 13 (WBSA).
48. Ibid.
49. GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No. 17 (WBSA).
50. Bradley-Birt to Halifax 2nd September 1912, GOB H. Poll 126/1912 No. 10 (WBSA).
51. Bengalee 24th December 1912, RNP Bengal 4th January 1913.
52. Ibid.
53. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 26th December 1912, RNP Bengal 4th January 1913.

out of proportion to the size or the political potential of the movements. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the colonial authorities had not attained that level of political sophistication that would allow them to recognise the phenomenon of nationalism and attempt to incorporate that within the colonial situation. Therefore paradoxically, by seeking a headlong confrontation with dissent they heightened political consciousness of the more articulate sections of the district population and provoked emotional sympathy for the cause of nationalism. More signficiantly, for a government that had no political roots in the district, repression against one of the leading zamindars of the district only intensified the continuing crisis of legitimacy of British rule in Midnapur.[54]

The Partition of Midnapur

The brief flirtation of some zamindars, lawyers and youth with 'secret societies' and terrorism does not seem to have had any significant impact on the course of political behaviour in Midnapur. Though the police repression that followed the discovery of the so-called 'Midnapur Bomb Conspiracy' had the effect of undermining the political credibility of the Raj, it was not immediately followed by any break in the old style of politics. 'Politics' in the narrow sense in which they were then conceived, continued to revolve around the familiar network of the bhadrolok upper stratum of Indian society. This social composition of the participants in 'politics' effectively determined the shape and character of Indian political intervention vis à vis the state.

Following complaints made by District Officers regarding the problems of administration in Midnapur, the Government of Bengal, in 1907, mooted the idea of a partition of Midnapur district.[55] The idea had been floated earlier in 1852 and 1876 but had been shelved on both occasions for financial reasons. In 1907, the Government of India vetoed the idea because of the unsettled political climate in the district and instead recommended the appointment of an Additional District Magistrate to relieve the over-worked Collector.[56] This particular solution did not find favour with the administrators in the Government of Bengal who considered the scheme

54. See Chapter 2.
55. Ibid.
56. Bengal Political Progs, Political Dept., December 1911, No. 23-6.

comparable with the notion of 'two Kings in Brentford' and 'foreign to the recognised scheme of Indian administration'[57] Officials in Bengal were therefore quite pleased when the District Administration Committee of 1913 explained the outbreak of terrorism in Bengal as caused by administrative failure and recommended the rapid partition of large districts such as Mymensingh and Midnapur as an essential part of the government anti-terrorist strategy. Consequently, on 7th July 1913, the Government of Bengal published its Resolution for the partition of Midnapur. On 26th January 1915, the government reviewed the reaction to its scheme and recommended commencement of work leading up to partition.[58]

The idea of the partition of Midnapur did not find any willing acceptance in the district. The zamindars were particularly incensed at the idea. The peculiarities of the centralised Tauzi system of revenue collection plus the fact that landholdings were frequently dispersed would necessitate the maintenance of two establishments if a partition was effected. Thus the Nawab of Murshidabad, with large landholdings in Midnapur, complained to the government that the location of Nayagram thana in the Jhargram subdivision of the new Midnapur district would cause him immense problems as most of his other land-holdings were located in the new Hijli district. Similarly, the European-owned Midnapur Zamindari Company complained that partition would mean that half of their Bahadurpur estate would be in Midnapur while all their other estates would be located in the new Hijli district.[59]

The zamindars were backed strongly by the lawyers, especially those with established legal practices in the district headquarters. The partition of the district would necessarily involve a considerable loss of earnings as there would now be two district courts instead of one. Thus Upendra Nath Maity, the President of the Midnapur town Bar Council, was one of the most vocal opponents of the partition, and devoted more than half his speech at the Bengal Provincial Conference session of 1920 to criticising the government plan. However, lawyers in Contai were

57. Speech by Sir Henry Wheeler 21st March 1921.
58. Bengal Political Progs, Political Dept., May 1917, No. 22.
59. Political Dept. Resolution 26th January 1915, Bengal Political Progs, Political Dept., March 1915 No. 7. Interestingly, the boundaries of the proposed districts were re-adjusted to suit the MZC convenience. The appeal of the Nawab of Murshidabad was however rejected.

initially less vocal in their condemnation of government when there seemed a real possibility of their town being chosen as the headquarters of the proposed new district. The barrister B. N. Sasmal for example, soon abandoned his generalised opposition to the partition in favour of campaigning for the selection of Contai town as the new headquarters. With considerable local influence, Sasmal was sure of benefiting tremendously if government accepted Contai's claim.[60] It is not surprising that he received strong backing from the Contai Union Committee and especially its chairman, Bepin Behari Sasmal, his elder brother.[61] The stance taken by particular lawyers was therefore dictated by strong material and sectional interests.

Lastly, there was a small minority of nationalists who based their opposition to the government scheme on purely emotive grounds. According to this group, which compared the partition of Midnapur to Curzon's division of Bengal, "the motive of the Government was more political than administrative. Midnapur could not be trusted in any way as she played a prominent role in the Indian freedom struggle. Government's main purpose was to hamper the political activities of the people at large in the freedom struggle and to divert their energies to some other affairs"[62] The main exponent of this viewpoint was Debdas Karan, who aired his views through the pages of his Bengali weekly, Medini Bandhav. In colourful prose, he issued forth a stream of denunciation:

> So let the people of Midnapore come forward and regardless of caste and creed, protest against this terrible scheme of partition. Let them assemble in different places, and in piteous voice make known the anguish of heart they all feel. Let them unite in their hundreds and their thousands in town and in country and set up a terrible agitation in a restrained and constitutional way against this heart rending proposal. In that case, no doubt before the thunderbolt falls, this accumulated mass of black clouds will have dispersed. But in carrying on this agitation, an unusual measure of restraint is necessary though they may be suffering the acutest agonies; while weeping

60. P. Pal, Deshapran Sasmal, Calcutta 1368 BS pp. 30-1.
61. Bengal Political Proceedings, Political Dept. March 1915, No. 6.
62. Sudhir Chandra Saha 'The Scheme for Partition of Midnapur in Different Phases and its Impact', Proceedings of Indian History Congress, 34th Session, Chandigarh 1973, Vol II, p.175.

> they must repress their feelings as far as possible. Unhappy as they are, they have many enemies, blood thirsty demons with lolling tongues to drink in their blood.[63]

The Medini Bandhav almost alone rejected all variations of the partition scheme, and publicly attacked Nihar and its editor Madhusudhan Jana for dividing the anti-partition movement and arguing the case for Contai as a future district headquarters.[64] The paper also counterposed the Rs 150,000 annual recurring costs for maintaining a new district with the inadequate social services in the district.[65] This line of attack found a responsive echo in the Calcutta press. According to the Bengalee:

> Is the partition more urgent or are the sanitary needs of the district more pressing, which would save human lives from preventible death and scatter the blessings of happiness and contentment among the people? Which is to be preferred from the humanitarian and even the Imperial point of view?[66]

This view gained some credibility after the government rejected a loan application from the Midnapur town municipality for the construction of a much-needed water-works.[67]

Although the partition scheme was announced by the government at a time when Bengal already had the weight of the Swadeshi experience behind her, the techniques of mobilisation employed in that period did not influence the campaign against the proposed partition. The limited forms of mass mobilisation employed in the Swadeshi movement were not pursued by the leaders in Midnapur who preferred the conventional strategy of meetings and petitions. Large meetings of notables were convened at various parts of the district where zamindars like Devendra Narain Hazra and Bhubaneshwar Mitra or lawyers such as Jyoti Prasad Chatterji and B. N. Sasmal spoke.[68] Most of the meetings decided in favour of petitioning the government "after taking signatures of almost all the important inhabitants of Midnapore"[69] By 1915, the government had received 18 petitions or memorials from various parts of the district supported

63. Medini Bandhav, 14th July 1913, RNP Bengal 26th July 1913.
64. Ibid, 1st September 1913, RNP Bengal 6th September 1913.
65. Ibid 21st July 1913, RNP Bengal 2nd August 1913.
66. Bengalee, 15th July 1913, RNP Bengal 19th July 1913.
67. See Chapter 2.
68. Bengalee 21st December 1912, RNP Bengal 4th January 1913. Nihar 30th August and 6th September 1921.

by the major zamindars and other men active in public life.[70] The tone of the petitions was without exception respectful, and the Midnapur politicians made it a special point to appeal directly to the Governor, Lord Carmichael, who had a reputation for being sympathetic to the aspirations of Indians. Medini Bandhav, the most uncompromising critic of the partition plan wrote:

> My Lord, Midnapore is an ancient district; do not divide it. O Lord Carmichael, the sea of compassion and friend of the people, today the 28 lakhs of your subjects inhabiting Midnapore are seeking your protection. Grant them again the assurance of safety.[71]

A special deputation from Midnapur travelled to Calcutta to present a personal appeal to Lord Carmichael to stop the partition. But Carmichael himself travelled to Midnapur to speak directly to the protestors. In his speech he made it clear that:

> ...the consideration which has weighed with me in making up my mind more than any other is this: I do not see how, unless you change the whole system of Indian administration - which no one proposes to do, and to attempt it would be a waste of many precious years - I do not see how you can ever get a really effective system of local self-governm nt introduced into this country unless you do divide up the larger districts. A real system of local self-government is, I think, the greatest need of Bengal.[72]

With government's refusal to reconsider, the Midnapur anti-partition movement collapsed.

Although the government remained formally committed to the partition scheme, the complications of war forced it to reduce official spending. Whitehall, keen to curtail government expenditure, did not view the scheme as 'essential' and attempted to apply the brakes.[73] In the

69. Bengalee 21st December 1912, RNP Bengal 4th January 1913.
70. Political Dept Resolution, 26th January 1915, Bengal Political Progs. Political Dept. March 1915, No. 7.
71. Medini Bandhav 21st July 1913, RNP Bengal 2nd August 1913.
72. Lady Carmichael, Lord Carmichael of Skirling: A Memoir, London 1929, p.199.
73. Governor General in Council to Secretary of State, 16th March 1918 Bengal Political Proceedings, October 1918, No. 44.

reconstituted Bengal Legislative Council, the Midnapur representatives, notably Sarat Chandra Jana, Sarat Chandra Mukherjee and H. S. Suhrawardy mobilised the powerful zamindar lobby to stall the grants for the partition scheme.[74] Moreover, the rapid development of the non-cooperation movement in Midnapur, especially B. N. Sasmal's successful campaign against Union Boards, made the government hesitant to go through with a scheme that did not appear to have any substantial backing from within Midnapur. Ultimately, on 23rd November 1921, after more than Rs 9 lakhs had been spent on the venture, the Government of Bengal took the view that though partition was essential, "for financial considerations it has been found necessary to suspend work at Hijli which for the present, therefore, is in abeyance"[75]

Though the partition of Midnapur was not ultimately effected, the anti-partition campaign itself was a failure and showed up the limitations of the Midnapur politicians. Though the ideology of nationalism had by now infected the district, there was no corresponding change in the style of institutional politics. The question of partition was never a 'mass' issue; interest in it remained confined to a small section of lawyers and zamindars whose material interests were likely to be jeopardised. Neither was any serious attempt made to bring up the question before a larger audience. Syed Nasim Ali, one of the very few non-official MLC's who supported partition was therefore quite accurate when he questioned:

> By the 'people' do we mean a set of gentlemen sitting one fine morning in the house of another gentlemen and passing certain resolutions and publishing them in the newspapers? ...Is it not a fact that the real people were not represented in these proceedings?[76]

For all its impressive rhetoric and verbose denunciations, non-official institutional politics in Midnapur did not anticipate the radical break in political sytle that was to accompany the rise of Gandhi. For all its virtues and consciousness-raising contributions, 'politics' in

74. BLC Progs, Vol I, No. 5, 1921, pp. 321-42.
75. Bengal Political Progs, December 1921, No. 20-5.
76. BLC Progs, Vol III, 1921, p. 519.

in Midnapur was a closed shop.

Agrarian Discontent 1908-1912

Institutional politics in Midnapur, as we have noted, operated around a small and limited circuit. Although power in rural society depended on the control of land, little effort was made to involve rural power-holders, especially the jotedars and the prosperous ryots, in the formal political life of the district. Yet this did not necessarily mean that these sections of society were apathetic or indifferent to a political culture. What it did mean was that the issues taken up by and the style of institutional politics did not appeal to them. Thus they remained aloof from both the Swadeshi movement and the efforts to fight against the proposed partition of Midnapur.

Yet, politics was an essential part of rural life. Besides the underlying political overtones of village factionalism, rural society was unquestionably tied up with its relations to the state in an atmosphere of expanding commodity production and commercialisation of agriculture.[77] This was more so in Bengal where British rule had introduced a complex series of laws governing the relations of the agricultural producer and landlord. These factors led to an inevitable politicisation, though it was not expressed in the idiom of the bhadrolok elite whose activities were the most conspicuous.

The Salt Parganas in the south-east corner of Midnapur came to the forefront of district politics in the period 1908-12. In terms of land-holding, this part of the district displayed one peculiarity: there was an abundance of estates directly under the management of the government or Khas Mahals (see Table 4.1). Contai subdivision especially, was financially very important for the government because of the high rent roll of the government estates.

77. cf. Jairus Banaji, Indian and the Colonial Mode of Production: Comment, EPW 6th December 1975, pp. 1887-92.

TABLE 4:1

Government Estates in Midnapur District 1912

Subdivision	Number	Area (Acres)	Rent (Rs)
Sadar	15	48,736	42,661
Ghatal	39	282	1,898
Tamluk	25	5,586	20,254
Contai	42	226,589	5,262,401

Source: Bengal Political Progs, Political Dept, October 1912.

The operations of the survey and settlement officers in the Salt Pargana or the jalpai lands in 1908 generalised agrarian discontent in that part of the district. Two distinct and separate issues were involved: the question of status of the tenants, and the increase in rents.

The settlement officers of the jalpai lands decided to grant parches to the bhagchasis thereby converting them into protected under-ryots. This action provoked immediate opposition from the tenants themselves who argued that bhagchasis were mere 'tenants-at-will' "who may be turned of(f) the lands they cultivate at the will of the landholders when the years crop have been harvested. They are mere agricultural labourers"[78] Arguing that local custom always held sway over any interpretation of the Tenancy Act, the tenants demanded that government recognise the difference between bhagchasis, ryots, and tenure-holders, and prepare a revised jamabandi. The government officers were variously accused of "sowing the seeds of future discords between landlords and their tenants" and carrying out "irresponsible and illegal acts"[79] Ashutosh Jana, an agricultural scientist and a leading activist among the tenants, comolained that if the status of bhagchasis were elevated, "they will oust the Brahmin,

78. Nihar, 11th May 1909, RNP Bengal 22nd May 1909.
79. Nihar, 13th July 1909, RNP Bengal 24th July 1909.

Kayasth and Kshatriya proprietors on whose behalf they cultivate their holdings"[80] Considering that the actual number of upper-caste landholders was insignificant, this appeal was clearly designed to win support from urban dwellers in Contai and Tamluk. The tenants, including both jotedars and ryots, whose interests were directly threatened ultimately concluded that the "question can be decided only by Civil Courts and not by Settlement Courts" and decided to act accordingly.[81]

There is no evidence to suggest that the Settlement officers or the Government of Bengal were out to improve the lot of the lowest strata of the peasantry. The confusion seems to have arisen out of the over-rigid interpretation of the Bengal Tenancy Act and an ecuation of the tenants as the landlord. However in coming to their decision, the settlement officers did not take into account the additional factor of the balance of social forces locally. The disaffected tenants had no doubt about their collective strength to resist any undue government interference. In 1885 they had combined to sabotage and ultimately to throw out the settlement operations of Mr. Price and had made life impossible for various zamindars, compelling some to sell up and quit.[82] As opposed to this, the bhagchasis were disorganised and insufficiently involved in the dispute to be able to take advantage of the settlement officers' verdict. They were mere victims of a sudden change from above. Thus in the course of an unpopular settlement, later reversed, government alienated one of the most influential sections of the rural population without generating any countervailing support. But in 1909, this hostility had not transformed to bitterness and open conflict.

The second dispute arising from the settlement operations concerned the increase in rent. The tenants complained not only at the increase of rent but also at the method of assessment. The Nihar wrote:

> This enhancement is being made by the government on account of the rise in prices of crops. But the prices published in the Calcutta Gazette from time to time are too high. The reason is that officers usually select a limited area of the best field where the crops are best, and cut the crops therefrom:

80. Hitavadi, 1st May 1914, RNP Bengal 9th May 1914.
81. Nihar 10th August 1909, RNP Bengal 21st August 1909.
82. Ramapada Chaterji, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of the Government and the Temporarily Settled Estates in the District of Midnepore 1903-11, Calcutta 1912, pp. 13-20.

> and often immediately threshing the green, undried corn, weigh it, and thus form their estimates and submit their reports.[83]

There was therefore a belief among the tenants that the increase in rent had been based upon an inaccurate assessment of the yield per acre. There were also complaints that rent-free tenures had also been assessed for rent.

What added to the discontent of the tenants was the indifference of the bureaucracy to their complaints. By law, the revenue officers in the district were supposed to receive any objections and pass judgements on them. But the officials, if the local press is to be believed, disregarded the proper procedures and refused to accept objections. Nihar, which acted as the voice of the disgruntled tenants, publicised the case of one Sivaprasad Mandal who sent 95 objections to the Director of Land Records, by registered post, without result.[84]

Offical apathy merely spurred on the tenants to greater activity. Petitions were organised and sent to the Lieutenant-Governor. In the revenue pargana of Doro, no fewer than 75,000 people contributed to a petition sent to Calcutta. In Tamluk, the tenants filed a petition to the Munsif's Court detailing allegations of irregularities. But it should be noted that the aggrieved tenants were quick to point out to the authorities that "instead of raising a howl by calling public meetings (they) are seeking relief in the proper quarters"[85] "The tenants", they reminded officials, "rely on the mercy of the benign government"[86]. It was a reflection of the level of sophistication of the rural leadership. With the matter in the hands of the courts, the 'prosperous ryots' of the government Khas Mahals decided "that to voluntarily pay the rents fixed at the recent settlement would prejudice their rights and would damage their case now pending before court and they have therefore deferred payment at the enhanced rates". They took care to assure the government that if the courts ruled against them, they would willingly pay the new rates. But until then, they would continue to pay the old rates.[87]

83. Nihar 2nd February 1909, RNP Bengal, 13th February 1909.
84. Nihar, 22nd December 1908, RNP Bengal 2nd January 1909.
85. Nihar, 16th March 1909, RNP Bengal, 27th March 1909.
86. Nihar, 9th March 1909, RNP Bengal, 20th March 1909.
87. Midnapur Hitaishi, 22nd July 1912, RNP Bengal, 4th October 1913.

The examination of the tenant's movement in the Khas Mahals of Contai and Tamluk provide us with a glimpse of the high level of organisation existing among a section of the peasantry in Midnapur. Adept at dealing with complex tenancy legislation and landlordism, they had, since the early 19th century, built up effective combinations to service their interests. There is no evidence to suggest that these combinations had been formalised into bodies on the lines of secular political associations or pressure groups, but in terms of effectiveness and co-ordinated work, there was no doubt that they were a living reality. The stereotyped picture of a helpless and ignorant peasantry groaning under the weight of landlordism and colonial rule would not hold true, for Midnapur at least.

Moreover, it is also erroneous to suggest that the effectiveness of these informal combinations grew out of the existing village communal solidarity. The definite class-conscious opposition to the granting of tenures to bhagchasis would suggest a stratification of rural society based on landholding and wealth. The peculiarities of tenancy laws in Bengal, however, united a differentiated body of rural folk under the broad category of tenants. They were united by common antagonism to the bhagchasis, and ostensibly common interest stemming from law. This factor was responsible for obscuring the immediate class differentiation in rural society and building up a unity that was separate from the village as a whole, but united in terms of legal standing. This factor also aided the development of the leadership of what the Midnapur Hitaishi called the 'prosperous ryots'[89], or what has been referred to earlier as the jotedars. This peculiar factor was to play a crucial role in Midnapur politics during the Gandhian phase of the nationalist movement.

The Midnapur Floods 1913

In the monsoon of 1913 terrible floods affected Midnapur, especially the Contai and Tamluk subdivisions. The Nihar reported that as a result of the floods most of the inhabitants of Contai subdivision had been rendered homeless.[89] The price of rice registered a sharp

88. Ibid.
89. Sanjivani, 25th September 1913, RNP Bengal, 4th October 1913.

increase to 8 or 9 seers per rupee and coarse rice sold for 5 to 7 seers per rupee, "at a place where people cannot afford to buy at 10 - 12 seers per rupee,"[90] Livestock also suffered because of the flood and the consequent shortage of fodder.[91] To make matters worse, there was a great scarcity of drinking water in Contai town.

The government machinery in the district took its own time in deciding on the intensity of the damage and suffering. The Subdivisional Officer accompanied by the Manager of a Khas Mahal visited some of the roadside villages and concluded that the damage was minimal.[92] The Collector agreed with their assessment and consequently did not recommend any pecuniary aid to the victims.[93]

In the absence of any government initiative in the task of flood relief, the entire operation had to be conducted by interested private individuals. In this the lead was taken by B. N. Sasmal, a native of Contai who was practising law in Midnapur town. He quickly set about organising relief teams and giving extensive press coverage to the floods. He got the vernacular press in Calcutta on to the scene and tried to impress on the government the gravity of the situation. As a result of this effort, teams of youth volunteers, especially members of terrorist organisations, came to the district from all over Bengal to aid in the operations.[94]

Thanks to this extensive press coverage, the government finally reacted in December 1913, and sanctioned remissions of rent, revenue and chaukidari tax, and the distribution of takavi loans to the tune of Rs 2 lakhs. Percy Lyon, a member of the Governor's Executive Council, also openly acknowledged the services of the private relief teams and instructed the government officials to work in conjunction with them.[95]

But criticism of the government continued. The Rs 2 lakh loan was held to be inadequate and the fairness of its distribution was called into question.[96] Led by the Medini Bandhav, the Calcutta press took up a demand for the government to suspend all survey and settlement operations

90. Ibid.
91. Nihar, 23rd December 1913, RNP Bengal, 10th January 1914.
92. Nihar, 18th November 1913, RNP Bengal, 6th December 1913.
93. Bangavasi, 25th October 1913, RNP Bengal, 1st November 1913.
94. Samaren Roy, op.cit., p.55.
95. Indian World, 3rd December 1913, RNP Bengal 13th December 1913.
96. Bangavasi, 25th October 1913, RNP Bengal, 1st November 1913.

in Contai, Tamluk and Ghatal for a period of two years.[97] A more serious cry went out to the government to undertake extensive repairs on the embankments in Vishnupur whose breach had partly contributed to the serious nature of the floods.[98] The new year witnessed even greater criticism of the government and especially the callousness of local officials. In spite of the government's assurance to the Bengal Legislative Council that people in the flooded areas would be exempt from paying the chaukidari tax, it was claimed that efforts were being made by chaukidars to realise the tax. This was so because the government had not paid chaukidars their salary. Accusations of the coercion of poor ryots were also made:[99] In the Khas Mahals of Contai ryots were threatened with the issue of certificates for the non-payment of rents which were to have been suspended.[100] The Sub-Managers of the Majnamutha and Jalamutha Khas Mahals not only did not recommend the suspension of rents in their estates, but actually issued certificates to defaulting ryots. Parwanas were also issued for the auction of their movable property.[101] The situation did not improve in 1914 which produced only a four-anna harvest for want of rain. The demand for leniency came even louder and the government chose to ignore the call.[102] By the end of 1915, the Contai area was faced with a serious water shortage and drought. Once again, government reacted with utter indifference, local officials not even bothering to raise the matter in Calcutta.[103]

The series of 'natural disasters' that affected Midnapur between 1913 and 1915 were not the worst the district experienced. In 1918, for example, the influenza epidemic broke out, and the excess death rate from July to November per 1,000 was 6.4 and partly as a result of the epidemic, the population fell by 5.5% between 1911 and 1921.[104] What distinguished 1913 from earlier disasters and the situation in 1918 was the active intervention of politicians. B.N.Sasmal almost single handedly raised the issue in the press and organised relief teams. In doing so, he broke new ground by actually seeking some form of confrontation with the local machinery of government with the support of a non-bhadrolok audience. The 1913 floods provided the first occasion in

97. Medini Bandhav, 10th November 1913, Nihar 11th November 1913, RNP Bengal, 1st November 1913.
98. The Mahommadi, 10th October 1913, RNP Bengal 25th October 1913.
99. Nihar 20th January 1914, RNP Bengal 31st January 1914. Bangavasi 7th February 1914, RNP Bengal 14th February 1914.
100. Hitavadi, 16th January 1914, RNP Bengal 24th January 1914.

which a politician involved in institutional politics attempted to break from his immediate audience in Contai and Midnapur towns, and search for larger and wider constituencies. By articulating the demands of a rural population with essentially peasant backgrounds, Sasmal made an important contribution towards linking, for the first time, two widely differing traditions of politics. In a sense, Sasmal and other Midnapur politicians anticipated the break from elite politics that was to accompany the rise of Gandhi.

Conclusion

The period 1907-19 witnessed a great change in the politics of Midnapur. The Swadeshi movement and the accompanying bhadrolok nationalist euphoria resulted in a rapid change in the ideological climate of the district, indeed the whole of Bengal, so much so that British officials like Carmichael and Percy Lyon were for the first time compelled to recognise that Bengalis had distinctly political aspirations.[105] But these nationalist political aspirations, shared by most of the Bengali 'liberals' had not yet developed a dynamism of their own and sustained themselves by a naive belief in the essential integrity of the Raj.[106] Thus in Midnapur, most of the prominent notables were active during World War I in raising government war loans.[107] But the high-handedness of the Government of India during the war years, especially the Defence of India Act of 1915, made it difficult for the nationalists to hold on to such illusions. Events in 1919 were to prove a decisive factor in shifting the political standing of these gentlemen closer to their terrorist counterparts, who had broken politically with the Raj.

But alongside this middle class or petty bourgeois nationalism there also emerged a parallel movement led by 'prosperous ryots' fighting against official interference in rural life. This movement was not infected by any such liberal constraints and operated outside the orbit of institutional politics. Though these two currents had emerged autonomously, politicians with high aspirations strove consciously to

101. Nihar 2nd June 1914, RNP Bengal, 20th June 1914.
102. Bengalee, 25th January 1915, RNP 6th February 1915.
103. RNP Bengal 13th November 1915.
104. The Census of India, 1921, Vol V, Part I, pp. 30-4.
105. Lady Carmichael, op.cit., pp. 181-2, J. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society, pp. 91-4.

build links that would cement such an alliance. In spite of the apparent complacency of district officials, politics in Midnapur was heading for a decisive break with the past, both in political style and content.

106. For an account of the dilemma of Bengali Liberalism see Ranajit Guha, 'Neel Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror,' Journal of Peasant Studies, II, 1, 1974.
107. Nihar 20th March, 1917.

The Non-Cooperation Movement

With the conclusion of the war in Europe in November 1918, political activity in India reached a feverish pitch. The hopes generated among 'moderate' politicians by the Secretary of State's August 1917 announcement, crumbled with the enactment of the Rowlatt Bill. Gandhi, who had spent the first half of 1918 on recruitment tours for the British war effort declared that he thought the Bill was not merely 'a stray example of lapse of righteousness and justice', but, 'evidence of a determined policy of repression'.[1] This belief was further compounded by the systematic high handedness of Sir Michael O'Dwyer in Punjab culminating in the notorious Jallianwala Bagh massacre on 10th April, 1919.

The Punjab atrocities aroused a sense of moral indignation in the hearts of most of theIndian intelligentsia, whether 'moderate' or 'extremist'. Bengal, which had experienced its share of the policy of selective repression during the war, was particularly shaken by the decision of the poet Rabindranath Tagore to renounce his Knighthood in protest against the Punjab happenings. But moral indignation did not extend to political sympathy. Though individual Bengali politicians like C. R. Das and Fazlul Huq accompanied Motilal Nehru and Gandhi in their investigations to the Punjab, the support for Gandhi's Satyagraha Sabha was only lukewarm.[2] The Bengal Provincial Conference meeting at Mymensingh in April 1919. expressed token support for Gandhi's satyagraha plans, but declined to take any concrete steps to put the resolution into practice.[3] In any case, the Bengali Hindu politicians had no audience beyond the usual network of lawyers and bhadrolok clerks scattered around Calcutta and the mofussil. As such, at this juncture, the Gandhian notion of a mass satyagraha did not hold out much attraction for them.

Neither did the hostile Muslim reaction to the Treaty of Sevres and the

1. Judith Brown ,- Gandhi's Rise to Power, Cambridge 1974, p.163.
2. Ibid, p.163
3. Ibid, pp. 166-7

Khilafat issue interest them in the least. Even though the Khilafat Day on 17th October 1919, had attracted a 10,000 strong rally of mainly illiterate Muslims, Bengali Hindu politicians did not see the necessity to forge any links with this wide layer of underprivileged people who had been brought into the political arena via the Khilafat. The Bengali bhadrolok politicians saw the Khilafat issue as a challenge to their dominance in provincial politics;[4] and generally they held the Muslims in contempt.

In 1919 and 1920, Bengali politicians were primarily concerned with the institutional changes brought about by the Government of India Act of 1919. The moderates led by Surendranath Banerjea regarded the reforms as a major step in the direction of responsible government and argued for Congress co-operation in working the reforms. The'extremists' led by C. R. Das, Byomkesh Chakravarty and Jitendralal Banerjea, relative newcomers in the political game, had little or no hesitation in denouncing the reforms as inadequate.[5] But denunciation expressing disappointment at the limited nature of the reforms, did not resolve the 'extremists' dilemma overwhether or not to participate in the forthcoming elections.

This dilemma came to the fore during the 1920 Bengal Provincial Conference convened at Midnapur town. In his Presidential address, Fazlul Huq thundered:

> Gentlemen, we cannot parley on these terms. For us the die is cast, the Rubicon is crossed between us and the bureaucrat. There shall be war, not hidden but open, and we shall not give up the fight till we have won for our country the full measure of political freedom.[6]

But interestingly, the 'fight' forecast by Fazlul Huq was to be conducted in the electoral arena and in accordance with the terms laid down by the Raj. The resolution moved by Jitendralal Banerjee called upon people to vote in the forthcoming elections for those 'patriotic'

4. For a selection of Bengali press response to Khilafat see Ibid p.223
5. Ibid, p.132
6. R.N.P. Bengal, 10th April 1920

candidates who supported the views of Congress.[7] In fact most of the 'extremist' Hindu politicians of Bengal, such as Byomkesh Chakravarty, C. R. Das, B. N. Sasmal, Jitendralal Bannerjee, Akhil Chandra Dutta, J. M. Sengupta and Nishit Sen, were candidates in the elections. B. N. Sasmal, a candidate for Midnapur, wrote lengthy articles in the local press explaining to voters the importance of exercising their franchise. In July 1920, on the eve of the Congress special session in Calcutta, Bejoy Krishna Bose, the Secretary of the Reception Committee, complained that Congressmen were too preoccupied with the election campaign to devote sufficient attention to the preparations for the Congress session.[8] The General Meeting of the BPCC on 15th August 1920 noted that though non-cooperation "is a perfectly constitutional weapon of political struggle between a people and its government", boycott of the Legislative Council was unnecessary. The strategy demanded "the presence of large number of such members as will be prepared to resort to non-cooperation within the Council"[9] This apparent contradiction between the extremists' radical rhetoric and hankering after Council seats led Nayak to note sarcastically:

> We hear that most Extremist leaders are girding up their loins from now to become members of the new Legislative Council. We fail to understand the reason for all these preparations. Why do they always decry the Montagu reforms and at the same time cannot bear the idea that admirers of those reforms will carry away the prize posts.

The Calcutta Special Congress of September 1920 exposed the National weakness of the Bengali politicians' strategy. Surendranath Banerjee and his followers did not attend the session, believing it to be packed by Gandhi's men.[11] By the middle of the session, Jitendralal Bannerjee joined the host of notables including Motilal Nehru now making a beeline for the Gandhi camp. From Bengal, it was left to C. R. Das and the veteran Bepin Chandra Pal to make a last attempt to stall Gandhi's march. But it was in vain. Not only was Gandhi's

7. Nihar, 18th April 1920. Among those who spoke in favour of Bannerjee's resolution were Maulvi Hajid Bux, J. M. Sengupta, Basanta Kumar Majumdar, Indu Bhusan Sen, Hiralal Gandhi and Surya Kumar Shome.
8. B. K. Bose to Pandit Gokaran Nath Mishra, Secy AICC 18th July 1920. AICC/13/1920.
9. AICC/13/1920.
10. Nayak, 5th April 1920. BNP Bengal 10th April 1920.
11. Brown, op.cit. p.263.

resolution carried by 1855 votes to 873, but the Bengali delegates supported him 551 to 395.[12] Though there was strong evidence to suggest that a significant section of the Bengal delegation had been purchased by Jamanlal Bajaj and other moneyed Marwari supporters of Gandhi,[13] the fact remained that Gandhi did possess an even measure of national support and overwhelming Muslim support. This, coupled with the desire not to get isolated from the Congress mainstream, compelled Das to urge his supporters to abide by the Congress mandate and withdraw from the Council elections. His words were heeded and altogether 25 candidates withdrew from the general constituencies in Bengal.[14]

There were other considerations too. Das was perhaps the first among Bengali politicians to gauge the fact that the franchise revision had broadened the political constituency beyond the narrow layer of zamindars and articulate lawyers.[15] But the Congress had no organisation to meet the demands or voice the aspirations of the newly enfranchised. Moreover, most Congress politicians were based in Calcutta and did not have political roots in the districts. Few could boast like B. N. Sasmal:

> ...that I had a good chance of getting elected to the Bengal Legislative Council must be apparent to many. And if people don't admit that, I am sure the residents of Contai and Tamluk will readily verify.[16]

Many of the politicians were, in fact, unsure of their electoral prospects. Satyendra Chandra Mitra, who withdrew from the Noakhali seat stated quite explicitly in 1922:

> We had very little chance to have the majority, e.g. Mr. Das was a candidate and he had a rival - a big zamindar. Though he had great chance, yet he was not absolutely certain. Mr. Chakravarty had also very little chance. I cite the example to show you the proof that we were right not to enter the Council as we had very little chance to have the majority.[17]

12. Ibid, p.270
13. Interview with Satcowripati Roy, Oral History Transcript 267 (NMML)
14. Nihar 21st September 1920.
15. AICC/2/1920
16. B. N. Sasmal - Sroter Trina, Gopinath Bharah 1329 B.S. p.2
17. Report of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee 1922 Madras n.d. p.96

Thus it was not any lofty considerations of unity and ideology, but sheer pragmatism that played the crucial role in some Bengali politicians' respect for Congress mandates.

Midnapur Elections 1920

The decision of the Congress to boycott the elections to the Council left a void in the Midnapur political scene. Though Congress was by no means a cadre-based mass party, its local leader, B. N. Sasmal, was widely respected and considered an easy favourite to win the Midnapur South seat. The local press had thrown in its lot with him and had advised people to vote for him as one "who always maintained some links with the political life of the nation"[18] But in Midnapur North, the Congress candidate, Satcowripati Roy, faced an uphill battle against the nationalist zamindar, Raja Narendra Lal Khan of Narajole, Satcowripati Roy's decision to opt out of the contest following the Calcutta Special Congress enabled the Narajole zamindar to secure his seat in the Legislative Council without a contest.

Sasmal's exit from the polls in the two-member southern constituency did not have a similar result. With the leading light out of the way, lesser luminaries jumped into the electoral arena. The relative geographical compactness of the constituency, plus the fact that the voter could cast two votes, made the South Midnapur seats attractive to the ambitious. Moreover, although Sasmal abided by the Congress mandate and withdrew, he did not launch any campaign to dissuade voters from participating in the elections. He merely issued a single statement that he was against voting for any candidate.[19] This passivity ensured that no political stigma attached to those participating in the polls. The attitude of Nihar, the nationalist weekly, was that Sasmal's decision to withdraw, though significant, was nevertheless an individual decision. The message of non-cooperation had not yet filtered down to the district.

The most important consequence of the Congress decision was that

18. Nihar 22nd June 1920
19. Nihar 28th September 1920

personalities rather than politics became the keynote of the campaign. Upendra Nath Sal, a lecturer in Patna College who proudly announced that he was a "double M.A.", arrived in Contai to contest the elections.[20] He hoped to capitalise on the typical bhadrolok penchant of assessing suitability in public life by looking at academic degrees. Unfortunately for him, his nomination paper was rejected. Ashok Chandra Dutt, a Barrister in the Calcutta High Court and a relative of K. B. Dutt, also announced his candidature. Though in no way connected to Midnapur, Dutt was a relative of J. De, the Subdivisional Officer of Contai. Using the latter's influence, Dutt was able to secure the support of zamindars, Biraja Charan Nanda and Devendra Nath Hazra, and some prominent figures of Contai and Tamluk including Mahendra Nath Maity of the Tamluk Bar, Upendra Narain Majumdar, Devendra Narayan Majumdar, Nagendra Nath Bakshi and Gyanada Charan Bose.[21] An interesting feature of Dutt's candidature was that he was supported essentially, but not exclusively, by the group in Contai who were called 'settlers' by virtue of the fact that they hailed from outside the district.

Except for Dutt, all the candidates of any significance were local people. Shital Prasad Ghose, Public Prosecutor and erstwhile Vice Chairman of the District Board, and Manmatha Nath Bose, a government lawyer of Midnapur town, contested the seat though they had no real links with Contai and Tamluk. From Contai town there was Bepin Behari Sasmal elder brother of B. N. Sasmal, who was connected with the Contai Local Board and Contai Union Committee, besides being an Honorary Magistrate. Also from Contai were Baranashi Bannerjee and Abanti Kumar Maity, both lawyers. Maity was a member of the Local Board and had close ties with the Hari Sabha temple and the 'settlers'. Sarat Chandra Mukhopadhya, lawyer and member of the Tamluk Municipality, was the only candidate to hail from the Tamluk half of the constituency.

Zamindars were significantly absent. Raja Sati Prasad Garga of Mahisadal entered the contest and then withdrew unexpectedly; Rai Mahant Radheshyam Das Adhikari of Gopiballavpur filed his nomination

20. Nihar 28th September 1920
21. Ibid

but then lost interest to the extent that he failed to submit his election expenses return.[22] The only serious contenders with any rural connections were Bepin Behari Sasmal, who owned a zamindari at Birkul, and Sarat Chandra Jana, a lawyer practising in Midnapur town who was involved with the Mahishya caste movement through his activist brother Ashutosh Jana. As a trained agricultural scientist, Ashutosh Jana was widely known and respected by the tenants of the district.[23] But in spite of his secure local roots and connections, Sarat Chandra Jana, too, shied away from overt politics. He merely declared that he was contesting "for reasons of patriotism and not for self-aggrandisement or selfish reasons"[24]

Campaigning was not intense and all candidates without exception lacked any sort of organisation. In contacting people in the remote interior, they were dependent on their own resources or on the resources of their clients, if they happened to be lawyers. Here Ashoke Chandra Dutt stole a march over his opponents by being able to avail himself of the services of his cousin who, as a Subdivisional Officer, may be assumed to have exercised some influence in his favour. In addition, Dutt had ample monetary resources which gave him an edge over other candidates, but created some resentment especially since Dutt was an outsider to the district.

The editor of Nihar, Madhusudhan Jana, while not actively siding with any one of the candidates, made it clear that he did not favour the intrusion of the Calcutta Barrister:

> With the exit of Mr. Sasmal various unknown people have now entered the fray. People neither heard of them nor have they done any work for the country...There are some candidates about whom the people of the district know very little or nothing.[25]

Some weeks before the polling, Nihar publicised a chance remark of Dutt in which he had referred to Midnapur in derogatory terms as chashar desh

22. BLC Progs Vol II,1,1921, pp. 138-9
23. See Chapter 4, for his role in the tenants movements.
24. Nihar 16th November 1920
25. Ibid.

(land of peasants)[26] This remark, which would have gone unnoticed in the bhadrolok circles of Calcutta, provoked a very hostile reaction among the predominantly Mahishya voters of Contai and Tamluk. There it was made against the background of an active caste movement that had been trying to promote a spirit of peasant-pride among the Mahishyas, and in an atmosphere in which other candidates were eager to steal a march over Dutt. Within days of this incident, Nihar had published irate letters from local voters; one remarked:

> We are glad that many educated local people who hail from this 'land of peasants' have sought election. It is these people we should vote for, not some outsider who knows nothing about the life of the province...There are enough qualified peasants among the candidates, and the people should vote for them.[27]

Dutt's indiscreet remark finally gave some focus to the elections. The issue before the electorate was presented as that of 'outsider' versus 'locals'. Candidates rushed to establish their bona fides. Baranashi Bannerjee issued an advertisement in Nihar stating that his grandfather was connected with Tamluk and his father with Contai.[28] Abanti Kumar Maity who had close connections with the settlers in Contai, the main backers of Dutt, hastily announced that he was proud to be associated with Midnapur and had no connections with 'arrogant' people like Dutt.[29]

The election campaign of 1920 was conducted without any reference to the political crisis that was soon to envelop India and Midnapur. Politics in the district still remained confined to personalities. Yet it seems that even here there was a growing awareness of the need to expand the political horizon beyond the tiny coterie of bhadrolok gentlemen. There was a need to articulate the interests of the newly-enfranchised rural electorate. In 1920, the controversy between 'locals' and 'outsiders' may be interpreted as a crude expression of this need. On one hand it reflected the insularity of rural politics, but on another it contained the seeds of future rural self-organisation.

26. Nihar 23 November 1920.
27. Letter from 'One Peasant', Nihar 23 November 1920.
28. Nihar 30 November 1920.
29. Nihar 23 November 1920.

TABLE 5:1 [30]

Election Results of Midnapur South Constituency 1920

Candidate	Occupation	Election Expenses Rs - as - p	Votes	
Sarat Chandra Jana	Lawyer	141 - 7 - 6	1,876	Elected
Sarat Chandra Mukhopadhya	Lawyer	54 - 3 - 9	1,741	Elected
Bepin Behari Sasmal	Zamindar	439 - 4 - 6	1,353	
Ashoke Chandra Dutt	Barrister	835 -13 - 0	1,263	
Manmatha Nath Bose	Lawyer	442 - 6 - 3	913	
Abanti Kumar Maity	Lawyer	86 - 9 - 0	704	
Narendra Nath Bose	Dist. Engineer	65 -10 - 0	286	
Radheshyam Das Adhikari	Zamindar	Not furnished	215	
Prabhat Chandra Dube	Not known	10 - 0 - 0	192	
Mukunda Kishore Chakravarti	Not known	5 - 4 - 0	129	
Baranashi Bannerjee	Lawyer	14 - 0 - 0	53	
Pulin Behari Sahu	Not known	1 - 2 - 0	51	
Devendra Nath Adak	Not known	0 - 8 - 0	43	
Shital Prosad Ghose	Lawyer	36 - 0 - 0	43	
Hriday Nath Majhi	Lawyer	Nil	29	
Bidhu Bhusan Huit	Not known	0 - 8 - 0	14	

From Calcutta to Nagpur

Though the bloc of 'extremist' politicians in Bengal had boycotted the Council elections, they were by no means committed to Gandhi's full programme of non-cooperation. The Hindu politicians led by C. R. Das and Byomkesh Chakravarty were apprehensive about Gandhi's plans to boycott schools and law courts. This was understandable as few lawyers had alternative sources of income. The Muslims, who by and large sympathised with Gandhi, were not united. Fazlul Huq, who had been silently supporting Gandhi during the Calcutta Congress, now took a stand against the boycott of courts. The efforts of Abul Kalam Azad and the Ali brothers to engineer a strike at the Calcutta Madrassa did not meet with much success. In fact, by December 1920, the Government of Bengal was confident that "non-cooperation in practice may be said to be dead in Bengal"[31]

The government was however being unduly optimistic. Though none of the big names in Bengal politics had come over to the side of open confrontation, other lesser luminaries like Jitendralal Bannerjee had done so. With deteriorating economic conditions and the rise in unemployment, the objective conditions for a political upsurge were beginning to be visible.

The sharply alternating cycles of boom and depression following the world war forced the pace of political discontent in India and Bengal. The effect on food prices was dramatic and in Calcutta wholesale prices more than doubled between 1917 and 1921.[32] Local feeling ran high on the question and six districts, including Midnapur, reported incidents of hath looting.[33] The depression in trade and industry led to large scale retrenchment of workers and clerical staff. According to the Investors Year Book of 1921, "Boundless optimism and confidence were, in the Autumn of 1920, suddenly changed to gloom and

30. Compiled from Nihar 21st December 1920, BLC Progs, Vol III 1921 pp138-9.
31. Quoted in Brown, op.cit, p.279
32. Dept. of Land Records, Bengal, Average Prices of Staple Food Crop (Rice) in Bengal from 1887 to date, Calcutta 1924
33. GOI H. Poll B. December 1917, No. 226-7.

stagnation"[34] Most significant, the services of a large body of educated unemployed were made available to the cause of militant nationalism. This section was to be the backbone of political agitation in the province. In Midnapur, as in the rest of Bengal, the price of foodstuffs registered a sharp increase (see Table 5:2). In the Santhal-dominated Jhargram subdivision, local shortage of rice evoked a hostile reaction against paddy export. Nihar commented:

> The rice which is produced in Midnapur would generally suffice to meet the needs of the whole population of the district. But the people export rice because of higher prices obtainable in foreign countries. High prices of rice cause acute suffering to the common people. Some experts say that if prices of rice rise in response to prices of other daily necessities it benefits instead of harming the common people of a predominantly agricultural country. People who sell rice to buy other goods do in fact benefit from this. But in our district buyers of rice number more than sellers of rice. In this case a fall in the prices of rice stands to the benefit of the people.[35]

In Contai and Tamluk, floods submerging 100 square miles under water added to the dislocation.[36] But economic dislocation by itself does not necessarily lead automatically to discontent against governmental authority. In India, where famines, droughts and other natural disasters were not uncommon, the rural population had developed a spirit of passive fatalism which Hinduism had reinforced ideologically. Moreover, though governmental intervention was on the increase, government still played a relatively low part in rural affairs. Hence it was not usual for the vast majority of the rural population to equate economic dislocation with governmental callousness. But economic crisis did contribute towards a favourable climate for the harnessing of discontent by outside intervention, especially when the injection of

34. Quoted in Rajat Ray, Masses in Politics: The Non Cooperation Movement in Bengal 1920-22, IESHR XI,4,1974.
35. Nihar, 27th January 1920, quoted in Rajat Ray, Masses in Politics, p.258.
36. Nayak 5th August 1920, Bengalee 5th August 1920; RNP Bengal 14th August 1920.

consciousness was linked to a series of local demands.

It was the political openings created by the deepening economic crisis in India which contributed to the growing support for the overtly confrontationist political line of Gandhi. Though the bhadrolok leadership based in Calcutta was hesitant to join in Gandhi's rebellion against the Raj, there were others to whom militant non-cooperation seemed the most suitable political tactic at a moment of government weakness. Jitendralal Bannerjee, a lawyer with strong connections in Birbhum, and B. N. Sasmal with a personal base in Midnapur, reflected this trend among a new group which had no vested interests in the bhadrolok politics of Calcutta or East Bengal-based professionals.[37] Along with Gandhi's Marwari supporters in Calcutta they felt no compunction in identifying with a non-liberal, religio-political doctrine that was Gandhism; few among the bhadrolok politicians could identify with Gandhi's particular brand of obscurantism, which according to Subhas Bose, "rationalise(d) a medieval absurdity into a modern panacea"[38] After Gandhi's victory at Calcutta, Nayak had commented:

> Congress has at last become the property of businessmen shopkeepers, agriculturist and the people at large. It is they who constitute the present Congress and they are the guardians and protectors of non-cooperation which will be spread and circulated by them.[39]

It was this fundamental shift in the social character of nationalist politics which the bhadrolok politicians were unwilling to effect.

The 'part timers' as Das and his supporters were called, were also swimming against a national tide. Even in the Central Provinces and Berar, where Tilak's followers still retained considerable support, Gandhi's line had carried the day. The weakening position of the 'extremists' must have stared Das in the face when he arrived for the

37. Sasmal, op.cit, pp. 3-5.
38. D. K. Ray, The Subhas I knew, Bombay 1946, pp. 32-3.
39. Quoted in Brown, op.cit, p.280

TABLE 5:2

Price of Rice in the Markets of Midnapur District (in Rupees per maund)

Year	Midnapur Town	Ghatal	Tamluk	Contai
1895	2.14	2.37	2.49	1.83
1905	2.77	2.98	3.02	2.42
1915	4.89	5.00	5.12	4.44
1916	4.67	4.89	4.78	4.21
1917	3.70	3.90	3.86	3.18
1918	3.27	3.52	3.70	3.12
1919	6.60	6.81	6.46	5.82
1920	7.19	7.36	7.44	6.53
1921	6.27	6.21	6.60	6.15

(Source: Dept of Land Records, Bengal - Average Prices of Staple Food Crop (Rice) In Bengal from 1867 to date. Calcutta 1924)

TABLE 5:3

Prices in India, 1913 - 1923

(Base 1873 = 100)

1913	143
1914	147
1915	152
1916	184
1917	196
1918	225
1919	276
1920	281
1921	236
1922	232
1923	215

(Source: Statistical Abstract For British India 1917-18 to 1926-27, p.628)

Nagpur session of the Congress in late 1920. Gandhi too was keen to accommodate his erstwhile critics. Having fundamentally altered the organisational structure of the Congress to attract new social forces, he readily accepted Das' plea to incorporate 'Swaraj' as one of the aims of non-cooperation. Hence a 'converted' Das was to move the main motion reaffirming the Congress belief in non-cooperation.[40] Gandhi had neutralised a potential source of opposition to his movement. But it must always be borne in mind that Das's was not a genuine conversion to Gandhism and all its ramifications; it simply reflected the ability of a shrewd politician to compromise so as not to be left in the political wilderness.

On his return from Nagpur, C. R. Das abandoned his lucrative law practice, donned khadi clothes and threw himself into the non-cooperation movement. Almost overnight, Das became 'Deshbandhu' and a Bengali folk-hero. Das's volte-face in Nagpur prevented a further split in the ranks of the bhadrolok. It may be speculated that the non-cooperation movement in Bengal would have intensified even had Das and his followers abstained. But it is also conceivable that without Das and Chakravarty, and their assorted followers, the non-cooperation movement would have generated in its wake a new brand of leaders who were not constrained by the political and cultural idiosyncracies of the Bengali Hindu bhadrolok. By joining the Gandhian bandwagon, Das ensured that the nationalist movement in Bengal remained under the control of the 'extremist' politicians of yesteryear. The prospects of a new and more radical leadership were firmly nipped in the bud in 1921.

The Beginnings of the Movement

Prior to the Nagpur Congress, the support for non-cooperation in Bengal had been largely passive. The Government of India had suggested to all provincial governments "that this movement, if left to itself will eventually collapse; ...and that any extensive interference with the

40. For a fuller account of Das' Volte-face see Richard Gordon, 'Non-cooperation and Council Entry 1919 to 1920' in Gallagher, Johnson and Seal, ed. Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics 1870-1940, Cambridge 1973, pp. 123-53.

freedom of speech and liberty of the Press is inconsistent with, and would be likely to prejudice the working of the new constitution".[41] The intensification of non-cooperation after Nagpur clearly altered the picture. A Government of Bengal spokesman noted correctly:

> Non cooperation is no longer a movement to put pressure on government to remedy specific grievances; it is an avowed attempt to destroy the existing government.[42]

In fact, the slogan of 'Swaraj in one year' had won the hearts of many an idealistic young person who now rallied behind C. R. Das.

But mere student boycott and activity around Calcutta did not satisfy Das, himself adept in the art of organising. Success lay in being able to create sufficient disorder all over the province, not least in the mofussil and the villages. But Congress lacked any credible organisation to be able to carry the message of non-cooperation and translate it into reality. Hence in January 1921, the Congress decided to despatch political emissaries to the districts to initiate agitation.[43] B. N. Sasmal and Satcowripati Roy, both of whom had abandoned their law practices, were despatched to their native district of Midnapur to stir up things.

But enthusiasm for the non-cooperation movement had preceded the despatch of emissaries. Inspired by the actions of their Calcutta counterparts, school students started to quit their studies to take part in the agitation. Though initially the numbers of students responding to the Congress call was very small, the authorities detected an unusual 'stir' which led them to close down certain schools for a fortnight or more. Nor was the restiveness confined to the prestige institutions such as Contai High School, Hamilton School Tamluk and Contai Model Institution; it also influenced students of the larger villages like Basantia, Mugberia and Hara.[44] More elderly sympathisers of the Congress had a difficult time impressing upon these idealistic boys that they should not abandon

41. GOB H.Poll 39/1921 (1).
42. H. L. Stephenson to GOI 19th February 1921, GOB H. Poll 39/1921 (2).
43. Note by H. Wheeler, 10th February 1921, GOB H. Poll 39/1921 Demi Official No. 1.
44. Nihar 8th February 1921.

their schools until alternative National Schools were established. In the Midnapur College, about 100 first year students quit their studies temporarily and some of them even opened up shops in the bazaar. "There is great resentment amongst the students", wrote Nihar, "about the type of education they receive which is only suitable for becoming lawyers and clerks. The charkha is catching on because of its emphasis on practical constructive activity"[45] There seems little doubt that what motivated these students to participate in the nationalist movement, was not considerations of power or the manipulations of selfish politicians, but a sense of fierce idealism and some naive belief in the historic destiny of youth in an atmosphere of shrinking employment opportunities.[46]

It was to harness this reservoir of enthusiasm permanently for the Congress that Sasmal first launched the National Schools in Midnapur. In early 1921, he converted his huge residence in Contai into a National School and secured the services of some nationalist teachers. Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, a teacher in the Contai Model Institution with very strong nationalist sentiments became the first headmaster, and others like Iswar Chandra Mal, Surendranath Das and Bijay Krishna Maity, later to become prominent in the district Congress, became teachers in the Contai National School.[47] Thanks to generous donations from sympathisers, the Contai National School was able to expand its student enrolment from 9 to 200 in a year. With Bengali as the medium of instruction,[48] the school placed heavy emphasis on the learning of skills such as weaving, carpentry and metal work. The school aimed at making students less dependent on the usual white-collar employment and instead encouraged them to start independent business enterprises.[49] In Kalagechia, the zamindar Jagadish Chandra Maity donated 14 bighas of land and about Rs 40,000 towards setting up a National School; other Congressmen - Bankim Chandra Bhowmick, Indra Narain Jana and Kshatra Mohan Bera - were also involved in the financing

45. Nihar 1st March 1921.
46. This phenomenon was also noticeable during the Naxalite agitation in West Bengal and the 1973-75 'JP' Movement in Bihar.
47. P. Pal, Deshapran Sasmal, Calcutta Publishers 1368 BS, pp. 70-71.
48. At a meeting in 1917, Pramatha Nath Bannerjee claimed that the study of the English language should be discouraged as it made people's minds warped! Nihar 13th March 1917.
49. Nihar 10th January 1922.

of the National Schools. Young graduates from a landed background such as Nikunja Behari Maity became teachers in the National School at Kalagechia.[50] At Dora, a third National School was started by Kumar Chandra Jana[51] Though the National Schools were only very small in number and did not even remotely threaten the government's control of education, their establishment was a very significant step in the Congress bid to bypass governmental structures. Their purpose was exemplary, in that they hoped to project some idea of nationalist visions of the educational process. But by their mere 'token' existence they gave Congress that extra dimension that distinguishes a political party from a national movement.

Apart from students and teachers, it was the lawyers who stepped into the movement in its initial phases. For a lawyer without alternative sources of income, as Sasmal had, abandoning practice was linked with severe economic hardship, and many remained sympathetic to the movement without actually participating. According to the government's very conservative estimates, by November 1921, only six lawyers in Midnapur had suspended practice and joined the movement.[52] Most prominent among those who abandoned their practice were Sasmal himself, Kishoripati Roy, the brother of Satcowripati Roy and with alternative income from land, and Mahendra Nath Maity, the leader of the Tamluk Bar.[53] With the intensification of the movement in November 1921, more lawyers left their profession. Among them, Mohini Mohan Das of Ghatal, Bankim Chandra Bhowmick, Srinath Das and Prasanna Kumar Giri of Tamluk were later to become prominent Congress activists.[54] But by and large, participation of lawyers in the movement remained confined to a very small minority. Unsuccessful and briefless lawyers such as Sailajananda Sen of Gidni also joined the movement at particular points, but few among them were able to withstand the financial strains of unemployment and most drifted back into the law courts.[55] Another reason for the lukewarm response of lawyers in Midnapur was the opposition of prominent nationalist vakils such as Upendra Nath Maity, Chairman of the Midnapur

50. Pal, op.cit. pp 70-1; Nihar 8th March 1921.
51. Nihar 15th March 1921.
52. BLC Progs Vol V/5/1921 p.54. This estimate appears to be on the low side. Another confidential report noted that by April 1921, 115 lawyers had suspended legal practice GOB H Poll 395/1924 (NMML).
53. Amrita Bazar Patrika 29th May 1921; Nihar 5th July 1921.
54. Nihar 20th and 27th December 1921.
55. GOB H Poll 395/1924 (NMML).
56. In the jute mills around Calcutta, the arbitration courts were organised by the Sirdars who managed to enforce their decisions because of the power they wielded as labour contractors GOB H Poll 395/1924 (NMML).

town Municipality, to the non-cooperation movement.

A natural corollary to the boycott of courts was the nationwide decision to set up arbitration courts to reduce litigation, especially among the rural population. The success or failure of these parallel structures depended on their ability to acquire a status of legitimacy. In the villages this meant the degree to which arbitration courts were backed by prominent landholders and the village mandal which determined the ability of the courts to enforce decisions. In the towns success was more difficult considering the proximity of official law courts, a huge band of under-employed lawyers ready to rush people into cheap litigation and the presence of government officials. Above all, it depended on the willingness of the two parties in conflict to abide by the verdict of the court, especially without the backing of the coercive apparatus of the state.[56]

Because of the difficulties inherent in establishing dual power, which were compounded by the unenthusiastic response from the lawyers, the arbitration courts never really got off the ground in Midnapur. The Contai National Committee, with Satish Chandra Jana as Secretary, set up an arbitration court in Contai town with five 'judges' including Sasmal and Pramatha Nath Bannerjee[57] Later, Kishoripati Roy set up another court at his house in the town.[58] In Tamluk, Mahendra Nath Maity took the lead in establishing arbitration courts.[59] There is no evidence to suggest that the arbitration courts in Tamluk and Contai had anything but a very marginal impact. Government sources claimed that although a few stray civil and criminal cases were brought before them, their main business was confined to settling petty mohulla quarrells which were unlikely to have been taken to the official courts in the first place.[60] However, Congress did achieve a significant success with arbitration courts among the Santhals of Jhargram subdivision, thanks to the backing from the mandals.

By the Summer of 1921 it was clear that non-cooperation was serving

57. Nihar 30th August 1921.
58. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 29th May 1921.
59. Nihar 5th July 1921.
60. R. Craddock to F. W. Duke 27th May 1913, GOB H Poll 248/1913.

as only a minor irritant to the government in Midnapur. It was not that any personal commitment or dedication from the individual Congressmen was lacking. Having abandoned his practice, Sasmal spent the first half of 1921 touring the remote interiors of Tamluk and Contai spreading the gospel of the movement.[61] But the spread of National Education, temperance and charkha, while useful as reform or social welfare measures, were irrelevant as the means of ousting the British Raj in one year. Moreover, the nature of the triple boycott programme implied that participation was restricted to the chosen few and therefore objectively ineffective. Experiences in other parts of Bengal and India had clearly demonstrated that the key to disruption lay in the ability of Congress to link up non-cooperation with specific localised grievances. It was with this in mind that Sasmal and the local Congress launched the Contai Union Board movement in the Summer of 1921.

The Contai Union Board Agitation

In 1919, Sir Surendra Nath Bannerjee piloted the Bengal Village Self-Government Bill through the Bengal Legislative Council. The inspiration for the Bill had come from the recommendations of the District Administration Committee Report of 1913-14. This Committee, which had been set up to formulate policy recommendations to defeat terrorism, had laid the blame for political unrest on the twin factors of bhadrolok economic deprivation and "the relative weakness of the administrative machinery in many... districts"[62] A feature of this latter phenomenon was the ineffectiveness or absence of government administrative structures at the village level. The Committee had strongly stressed "the desirability of establishing among the people representatives of Government apart from the Police"[63] Through a network of circle officers and a scheme of village autonomy it was hoped to bring remote villages of Bengal under closer scrutiny and official supervision.

Surendra Nath Banerjee, who looked to Lord Ripon's policies as "our Magna Carta in the matter of Local Self-Government"[64] was nominated

61. Sasmal, op.cit, pp 8-9: Amrita Bazar Patrika 5th June 1921.
62. R. Craddock to F. W. Duke 27th May 1913, GOB H. Poll 248/1913.
63. Bengal District Administration Committee Report 1913-14, Calcutta 1915, p.29.
64. Bengal Municipal Progs (Municipal) Jan 1916. No. 3.

to the government to give concrete shape to the District Administration Committee recommendations. The Bengal Village Self-Government Act (hereafter BVSG Act) stipulated that groups of villages should be mapped out into convenient village unions. Each union was to have a Union Board to be elected by people paying Rs 1 or more in Chaukidari tax. Although the Union Boards were to come under the broad supervision of Circle Officers who would be of the rank of Sub Deputy Collector, only one-third of the Union Board would be nominated by the government. The Union Boards were empowered to deal not only with the chaukidars but also to supervise village roads, water supply and sanitation. For this purpose they were to be encouraged to become self-sufficient in finance, and given power to raise taxation to a maximum of Rs 84 per annum. However, village autonomy would not be complete as the District Magistrate and the Divisional Commissioner had a total say in the appointment and dismissals of chaukidars and daffadars. They were also given the right to supersede the Union Boards at their discretion.[65]

The establishment of Union Boards, coinciding with the reform of the District Board, marked yet another step in the government strategy to expand the functions of government and its network of collaborators. Through the Union Boards, government attempted to institutionalise the informal leadership that had already existed at the village level. The extensive powers of taxation given to the Union Boards signified a further attempt to ease the pressure on central and provincial revenues, and yet maintain a facade of development-orientated programmes at the lowest level controlled by local people. At one level it meant the abdication of direct control but at another a concerted attempt to legitimise the political basis for British rule in India.

The establishment of Union Boards in Midnapur district was marked by an amazing display of administrative inefficiency. On 22nd July 1919, the Contai Local Board recommended the establishment of Union Boards in the Contai thana. The move was seen as a purely experimental measure confined to an area that was located close to the subdivisional head-quarters. In August 1919, a group of three Local Board members led by Abanti Kumar Maity requisitioned a special Local Board Meeting to

65. Bengal Municipal Progs (LSG) August 1917, No.2-3.

demand the establishment of Union Boards throughout the Contai subdivision. As a known loyalist lawyer of Contai, Abanti Kumar Maity was always keen to win government favours by posing as a spokesman for the educated non-Congress bhadrolok, and especially the 'settler' community of Contai. On 31st August 1919, the Local Board met and unanimously recommended establishment of Union Boards in the entire subdivision. J. De, the subdivisional officer, was quite aware that certain Unions in the Contai and Ramnagar thanas might not receive Union Boards enthusiastically. But De was too embroiled in the local factionalism of Contai to take a detached view. What made matters worse was the paucity of Circle Officers required to do the spade work of propaganda and education, so essential for the success of this ambitious project. Moreover, a number of Circle Officers were involved in the relief operations following the serious floods in Contai in the Summer of 1920. No serious attempts were made to ascertain the attitude of villagers towards the Union Boards. One meeting was convened on 6th September 1919 which was attended by about a couple of thousand people but at which Union Boards were discussed as just one item along with influenza, cattle disease, Bengali regiments and the establishment of a college. The result was that few people in the district understood the scope of Union Boards and all their ramifications. This ignorance was to be fully exploited by the non-cooperators.[66]

In spite of inadequate preparations the government decided to go ahead with Union Boards in Midnapur. It was decided to establish 227 Union Boards in the district, and elections were scheduled for January 1921. The preparation of the electoral rolls left a large number of potential voters dissatisfied. The government notification stated that any person who paid Rs 1 or more in chaukidari tax by 18 Chaitra 1326 (BS) would be entitled to vote. But the fact that many ryots paid their tax at the end of Chaitra meant that a considerable section of the voters was disenfranchised in the coming elections. Medini Bandhav estimated that only 15 to 16 people from chaukidari unions containing 700 to 800 inhabitants would have the right to vote, though by right the number

66. Report by S. N. Ray, Joint Magistrate, 1st November 1921 in Buddhadeva Bhattacharya, Satyagrahas in Bengal 1921-39, Calcutta 1977. Appendix III, pp 29-43.

should have been three times higher.[67] Secondly, adequate notice for the elections was not given. Even though the Presidents of Panchayats were given notice that 30th November 1920 was to be the last date for filing nominations, many of them failed to announce that fact by beat of drum. This was often due to the very simple fact that the Panchayat President did not have a knowledge of English and therefore could not understand the District Magistrate's public notification. But in many cases, the lapse was due to the unwillingness of the Panchayat President to allow people from rival village factions to contest.[68] Whereas the government had hoped to remove the stigma attached to Panchayat members by encouraging more educated people to participate in the Union Boards, the reality was that in some Unions the old faces continued to mediate between the villagers and government.[69] Lastly, the elections to the Union Boards followed immediately in the wake of the Legislative Council elections, and thus, where adequate information had not been disseminated, voters were confused as to what exactly they were voting for. A government official reported:

> If there was any clear idea at all, it was that they were electing men who could settle their village disputes. I may quote the statement of the President of Union V, Ramnagar: 'The villagers now say that their disputes solved locally and these Boards would be replicas of Legislative Councils.'[70]

The reality of the situation was that government, egged on by its loyalist supporters, had rushed into this particular political experiment. The result was that administrative bungling and simple confusion prevailed. Had the Union Boards been formed in a relatively tranquil period, it is conceivable that the bureaucracy might have retreived their position. But at a moment when the Raj was embarking on one hand on a series of major national constitutional reforms, and on the other facing a concerted attack on its institutions by Congress and the Khilafatists, little attention was paid to the implementation of the BVSG Act. Congress was provided with a cause to exploit.

67. Quoted in Dainik Basumati 17th May 1920, RNP Bengal 22nd May 1920.
68. Nihar 23rd November 1920.
69. Nihar 1st February 1921.
70. Bhattacharya, op.cit, Appendix II, p.38.

As far as the government was concerned, the crucial feature of the Union Boards was their power to raise resources locally. As early as 1920, in the Burdwan Divisional Conference, J. N. Gupta, the Divisional Commissioner, had made this clear when he proposed that:

> It appears to be desirable that in order to encourage Union Boards to undertake taxation for rural improvement, the District Board grant to these bodies should be regulated according to the amount of assessment imposed by them.[71]

This was reiterated in September 1921 by L. Birley, the Additional District Magistrate, when he warned the District Board against sanctioning excessive sums of money for the Union Boards, even in the initial phases.[72] Therefore, as far as government was concerned the Union Boards had to raise the bulk of their resources locally with only a minimum of outside help. The disastrous experience with the Union Committees seemed to have made no impact on the thinking of officials.[73]

But thanks to the secrecy surrounding the decisions of the Government of Bengal, this policy approach was not made clear until after the establishment of the Union Boards. In February 1921, the newly-elected Union Board members found themselves faced with the unenviable task of having to raise additional local taxes to justify their existence. This realisation among the Union Board members was coupled with a growing resentment and panic among the people, especially the better-off sections who faced the prospect of increased taxation. The discontent was the greatest in Contai town and surrounding villages. Here the Union Board Chairman, Nagendra Nath Bakshi, a prominent Loyalist, rushed headlong into the task of preparing fresh assessments. Wild rumours were circulated that the new tax would be $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the old chaukidari tax and irate voters demanded to know why the Union Board members had not warned them about this impending tax increase.[74] From Tamluk came the alarming news that the District Board would subsidise each Union Board to the tune of Rs 100 only, and the remainder would have to be raised through local taxation.[75] It was at this juncture

71. L.S.S. O'Malley to Commissioner, 23rd May 1921, Jud-Gen VI/5/1921 (MRR).
72. L. Birley to Chairman, Midnapur District Board, September 1921 Jud-Gen VI/5/1921 (MRR).
73. See Chapter 2.
74. Letter from resident of No. 1 Union Board. Contai Nihar 21 June 1921.

that B. N. Sasmal decided to intervene in the debate, at a moment when spontaneous resentment against the Union Board taxes was becoming fairly widespread.

The Congress attitude towards Union Boards had hitherto been ambiguous and contradictory. The Nagpur Congress had decided that Congressmen who were members of Local Boards or Municipalities need not resign their seats as part of non-cooperation. In April 1920, the Bengal Provincial Conference had voted to oppose the BVSG Act, but the decision had been overturned by the Provincial Working Committee who thought it would be inadvisable to launch a campaign against the Act.[76] In Midnapur, prior to 1921, no known Congressmen had publicly voiced opposition to the principle of Union Boards. In fact, in July 1920, Nikunja Behari Maity wrote a letter to Nihar complaining that only two thanas in Contai subdivision had been brought into the purview of the Act. He advised people to demand from the authorities that Union Boards be established in their areas.[77] Nihar, the Contai weekly sympathetic towards the Congress, always expressed the hope that the establishment of Union Boards would see the participation of a greater number of educated people in public life.[78] So while there might have been some dissatisfaction over the election of a particular candidate, all groups in the district were virtually unanimous in their support for the principle of Union Boards.

None the less, it was the editor of Nihar, Madhusudhan Jana, who initiated a campaign against Union Boards. This dramatic volte-face was caused by an outbreak of factionalism within the bhadrolok residents of Contai town. During the 1920 elections to the Legislative Council, Nihar, as we have seen, had been in the forefront of the campaign to discredit the canditure of Ashok Dutt, the relative of J. De, the Subdivisional Officer. After Dutt's defeat, the 'settlers' in Contai who had supported him, started a parallel weekly called Hijli Hitaishi. In August, the local authorities withheld certificates and sale notices from Nihar, and gave them instead to Hijli Hitaishi. This, a rash action by De, effectively turned Nihar against the group running Hijli Hitaishi,

75. Nihar 5th July 1921.
76. Sasmal, op.cit, pp 9-11.
77. Nihar 13th July 1921.
78. Nihar 23rd November 1920.

who also controlled the Contai Union Board, and the government.[79]

There followed a crude policy of slander launched by Nagendra Nath Bakshi and Baranashi Bannerjee of the Contai Union Board, in the pages of Hijli Hitaishi, against those who were opposing them. Nihar got an opportunity to get its own back on this group after the revised tax assessments for Contai Union Board were published. These assessments showed amazing discrepancies. B. N. Sasmal was taxed Rs. 4-8-0 quarterly on an income of Rs. 300, while Baranashi Bannerjee got away with a tax of Rs. 4-2-0 on an income of Rs. 1,000; Hiralal Laha was taxed Rs. 3-12-0 on Rs. 100, while Naba Kumar Bera paid Rs. 2-4-0 on Rs. 1,000.[80] Such blatant favouritism and corruption produced an instant reaction. Nihar veered from its ambigious position to one of total hostility to the very establishment of Union Boards. B. N. Sasmal took advantage of this disaffection to tie in the non-cooperation movement with the Union Boards question.

In early June 1921, irate traders of Contai town convened a meeting to discuss Union Boards and taxation. The members of the Contai Union Board were asked to attend but none did so. In his speech, B. N. Sasmal told the audience that the Union Board members had duped the voters, but were now revealing their true selves. A vote taken at the end of the meeting which decided unanimously against Union Boards.[81] The campaign was now under way.

In their propaganda against Union Boards, Sasmal and his associates concentrated mainly on the question of increased taxation. Sasmal cleverly pointed to the clause in the BVSG Act which permitted local taxation up to a maximum of Rs 84, and gave people the impression that this increase was inevitable any day.[82] The revelation produced a situation of panic. The President of Union VIII (Alankarpur) of Ramnagar thana told government officials that he was personally in favour of the Act, but:

79. Bhattacharya, op.cit, Appendix II, p.40.
80. Nihar 19th July 1921.
81. Nihar 7th June 1921.
82. Amrita Bazar Patrika 2nd October 1921.

> the people do not understand. They have been told that their tax will be increased twelve times and they believe that even if no extra tax is imposed this year it will be imposed next year, either by the Board itself or by Government. If anything is said to contradict it, they say we are deceiving them.[83]

On hearing of the campaign launched by Sasmal, some Union Board members were themselves convinced that government had tricked them into accepting an Act whose implications they were not aware of. Mritunjoy Sasmal the President of Union X, Ramnagar "said emphatically that they knew nothing about the provisions of the Act before the Board was constituted. There was an idea that Union Boards meant settlement of their cases in their villages by village authorities and this the people were anxious to welcome. They had no idea whatever that Union Boards would involve the possibility of increased taxation"[84] Sensing the resentment of the people to increased taxation, some Union Board members were anxious to abandon a project whose efficacy seemed questionable.

The Congress, in its campaign, was especially keen to win over the landed sections of the rural population. The old Chaukidari Act had never been fully approved by the zamindars and jotedars because of the power vested in the hands of government servants for the appointment and dismissal of chaukidars and daffadars.[85] The new Union Boards did not restore this power to the 'village community' or its elected representatives although they gave Union Boards the right to impose additional taxation. There were therefore, no tangible benefits for the propertied interests to offset the prospects of a fresh dose of taxation. Moreover, there was no uniformity in the taxation and those holding property of any sort were assessed, even in more than one union. This was a change from the old pattern where only people who had property in the form of houses and kutcheries were assessed for chaukidari tax. The new pattern affected all big landholders adverselyand Sasmal was cuick to capitalise on the fact:

83. Bhattacharya, op.cit, Appendix II, p.37.
84. Ibid, Appendix II, p.36.
85. See Chapter 2.

> ...by introducing lands in place of houses and kutcheries the Permanent Settlement of this province...has at last indirectly attacked by this self-governing measure...One thing absolutely clear now is that a new taxation is being imposed under this Act upon our permanently settled lands, which must for ever remain immune from fresh taxation of any kind according to the provisions of Regulation I of 1793. It does not matter by what means they are taking the money from us now, for their demand is based upon the income from permanently settled lands. And therefore they are not only directly taxing our agricultural income, but also indirectly putting a fresh tax upon our lands permanently settled, in direct violation of the existing provisions of law on the subject.[86]

In what was seen essentially as a conflict between the government and the 'people', Sasmal was unwilling to raise embarrassing questions regarding differences within the 'people'. He therefore ended up championing the zamindari system and the landed interests in order to maintain the perspective of common interest against the government. In its wake, this strategy was firmly to establish Congress as the organisation representing the interests of the rural propertied class.

Sasmal also appealed to even more fundamental drives. Studying the phenomenon of nationalism, Tom Nairn has noted that it is by nature 'ambivalent' because, "societies try to propel themselves forward to certain kinds of goal (industrialisation, prosperity, ecuality with other peoples etc.) by a certain sort of regression - by looking inwards, drawing more deeply upon their indigenous resources, resurrecting past folk heroes and myths about themselves and so on".[87] Thus too Sasmal introduced the bogey of the destruction of traditional village life. He declared that the object of Union Boards was to introduce western civilisation into the villages through the back door:

86. B. N. Sasmal, 'Beware of Union Boards II', Amrita Bazar Patrika 23rd October 1921.
87. Tom Nairn, The Modern Janus, New Left Review 94 November - December 1975, p.18. Nor was this confined to 'pure' nationalism The great Russian chauvinism of Stalin also took recourse to such myths.

> If we want Swaraj of the English kind, then these laws will come in handy. If we want our religion to be like English religions, this law will do that. If the people want it that way then they should accept these laws, but I personally will not accept this.[88]

In claiming that Union Boards would bring to the villages of Bengal a 'Godless materialist atmosphere', Sasmal deliberately created a confusion between the 1861 Police Act and the BVSG Act. The former, better known in the villages as the 'Number 5 Law', was known for the powers it gave to Panchayats to arrest people urinating or defecating in public places. The BVSG Act, which was Act V of 1919, was presented as meaning the same thing - a confusion which was increased when it appeared in Bengali translation as the 'Number 5 Law'.[89] L. Birley, the Additional District Magistrate, noted that in some villages "people have been wrongly induced to believe that all householders will be compelled to build privies"[90] Sasmal concluded, in language reminiscent of Gandhi:

> I therefore enter my emphatic protest against this open and widespread attempt to modernise our village social life which is already in a process of disintegration and which some of us are striving hard to build anew, and declare that in the present circumstances it is a question of principle with me to have anything to do with the Bengal Village Self-Government Act.[91]

A reactionary line of thought, catering to popular prejudices, clearly helped popularise a campaign taken up for other reasons.

Another reason why the campaign against the Union Boards reached such popular dimensions was the personality of Sasmal himself. Well-known as the first Mahishya barrister who had forsaken his lucrative practice 'to work for the country', his personal reputation in the district, and especially Contai, was very high. Kshetra Mohan Samanta, a Congress worker, claimed that people were willing to believe Sasmal because he

88. Nihar 23rd August 1921.
89. Hiteshranjan Sanyal, Dakshin Pashchim Banglay Jatiyatabadi Andalan, Chaturnga, Kartick-Poush, 1383 (BS) pp. 194-5.
90. Bhattacharya, op.cit. Appendix III, p.48
91. Quoted in ibid, p.10.

could understand their needs and did not want to deceive anyone.[92] Perhaps closer to the truth was S. N. Ray, a government official who observed:

> The subtlety of the whole campaign lay in the fact that Sasmal as a lawyer was interpreting the sections of the Act to them.[93]

As a lawyer, he interpreted sections of the Act in a manner which, though dishonest was politically effective. He played up certain genuine fears that existed in the minds of rural people and maintained them with the skilful use of rumours and misrepresentations. But in the ultimate analysis, the campaign succeeded because it touched the pockets of the people, especially the rich, at a period of economic dislocation.

Although Union Boards were spread all over the district, the movement against it was concentrated around the thanas of Contai and Ramnagar. This geographical compactness made organisation a relatively easier task and it was also possible to bring in volunteers from Contai town regularly. But it should be borne in mind that the Union Board movement was essentially a passive movement. Once villagers had decided to pay or not to pay the Union Board rates, there was little else they could do but await government moves to attach their belongings. But to prevent those who had refused to pay the new taxes from succumbing to government pressure, Congress kept the spirit of the movement alive by organising mammoth public meetings where speakers from Calcutta would also participate. Congress branches were also started and people encouraged to become members of the party. Social pressures were exerted on the Union Board members to resign, and many yielded to this pressure and gave up their seats.

On the whole, the campaign for the non-payment of the Union Board taxes proved quite popular as a majority of the people refused to pay. By

92. Sanyal, op.cit, p.195.
93. Bhattacharya, op.cit, Appendix II, p.34.

October 1921, the government abandoned attempts to persuade people to pay their rates, and initiated attachments. But far from breaking up the movement, attachments only hardened the spirit of resistance. When tehsildars arrived at the village accompanied by armed guards, women came outdoors blowing conch sells and willingly submitted their utensils for attachment. "There is competition", wrote Sasmal, "to deliver moveables first".[94] After the attachments, government officials found themselves in a dilemma as to what to do with the utensils, as porters and cartmen refused to handle them in fear of reprisals. The auction of the attached goods also turned out to be a mockery. A reporter for the Amrita Bazar Patrika described one of these:

> The goods of Krishna Bhuia were the first to be put to the auction. It was quite a lot of costly valuables but the price which was to set the bidding in motion was Rs 10 only, which however soon came down to Rs 4, this again to Rs 1 only. But there was nobody to bid for the things. So the auction had to be postponed.[95]

This overwhelming display of village solidarity took the government quite by surprise. They had hoped that the movement would inevitably collapse once there was a show of force by the government. In fact, the attachment operations had quite the reverse effect. S. N. Ray, the Joint Magistrate sent to tour the Contai region reported that "opposition has stiffened as a result of the attachment proceedings"[96] There was little government could do beside recommend the use of greater force, and this would seem rather ironical since the issue at stake was village 'self-government'. J. Younie, the Subdivisional Officer of Contai, set the ball rolling by recommending to government the abolition of the Union Boards.[97]

Nor was Younie alone in his belief. By October 1921, local officers in Tamluk reported that tehsildars were facing growing opposition in their bid to collect Union Board dues. In Ghatal, local resentment against Union Board taxes led to Circle Officers being abused and insulted in

94. Amrita Bazar Patrika 2nd October 1921.
95. Ibid, 7th October 1921.
96. Bhattacharya, op.cit. Appendix II, p.29
97. Ibid, Appendix III, pp. 43-47.

the village of Khukurda. Demoralisation in the ranks of government servants set in after opposition was coupled with social boycott.[98] The news of the Contai happenings had given people the inspiration to protest against the increased rates and this was transformed into actual non-payment when backed by the influential men of the village. In more normal circumstances, Union Boards would probably have led to some ineffective disgruntlement, but the happenings at Contai, which Congress took care to publicise widely in the district, and the general atmosphere of non-cooperation offered people an alternative to passive acceptance of government decress. An official survey conducted in late 1921, showed an overwhelming majority of the Union Boards recommending their own dissolution.[99]

It was true that the resentment against the Union Boards was not universal. Except in the two thanas of Contai where the particularities of local factionalism compelled Sasmal to encourage and build up a mass movement, opposition in other areas was the result of the Union Board members themselves fearing the loss of their local influence. Congress was therefore able to rope them into the movement instead of having to confront them on the issue. This made the task of building the movement relatively easier. But where the local dominant faction was powerful enough to resist Congress pressure, it continued to support the idea of Union Boards. Thus the Union Board at Gopalnagar in Tamluk petitioned the District Magistrate to thwart "the conspiracy of the non-cooperators"[100] However, the advocates of Union Boards never really stood a chance. Since the issue was posed as one of increased taxation rather than village self-government, they could not realistically hope to carry their constituents with them for long, especially when Sasmal's alternative strategy was succeeding all around. By November 1921, government came to the conclusion that enough support for Union Boards did not exist in Midnapur and consequently withdrew the operations of the BVSG Act from the district.[101]

98. Sanyal, op.cit, p.201
99. Of the 37 Union Boards consulted, 27 favoured dissolution. Letter 6489 Judicial, Jud-Gen VI/24/1921-2 (MRR)
100. Jud-Gen VI/24/1921-2 (MRR).
101. BLC Progs Vol V, 1921. pp. 137-50

An anti-Union Board campaign had never figured in the Bengal Congress' programme of non-cooperation, and in order to attract the widest possible layer of support and to evade government prosecution, Sasmal insisted that the local movement against Union Boards had nothing to do with the larger non-cooperation movement.[102] The nationalist press too went along with Sasmal and called it "an economic movement rather than a political one"[103]

So as to distinguish the movement from a civil disobedience campaign, Sasmal advised the people not to pay the increased Union Board rates, but to pay the old chaukidari tax and to obtain receipts for it.[104] But this separation of non-cooperation from the Union Board movement was merely a convenient facade, and locally the two movements were considered synonymous. The resentment against Union Boards was consciously generalised into opposition to British rule and support for the Congress. At the most important public meeting on Union Boards, in August 1921, at Saraswati tala in Contai town, which was attended by at least 12,000 people, Paresh Chandra Maity and Nikunja Behari Maity started the proceedings by first explaining the principles of non-cooperation to the audience.[105] Satcowripati Roy, one of the Congress 'emissaries' despatched to Midnapur, also made it clear that he thought the Union Board agitation to be linked to non-cooperation.[106] At the Contai public meeting, Sasmal told the audience that he hoped India would attain Swarej by December and the whole chaukidari system would be revised fundamentally.[107] In various places Congress volunteers went a step further and told people that the four anna Congress membership or a contribution to the Tilak Swaraj Fund would entitle them to exemption from the payment of the chaukidari tax.[108] And nor did the Congress organisation come down heavily on these local indiscretions. So great was the enthusiasm and optimism that all non-violent methods were condoned in the race for Swaraj. When seven villagers from Ramnagar were sentenced to a month's imprisonment for not paying Union Board dues and urinating on the door of the granary of the local Union Board President, the Congress organisation promptly turned them into martyrs. After their release a huge public meeting was convened in Contai town, where Sasmal spoke and the seven were paraded as heores.[109] As for the government,

102. Sasmal op.cit, p.11.
103. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 4th October 1921.
104. Nihar 20th September 1921.
105. Nihar 20th August 1921.
106. Oral History Transcript No 267, (NMML).
107. Nihar 20th August 1921.
108. GOB H. Poll 395/1924 (NMML)
109. Nihar 30th August 1921..

they had no illusions of the Union Board movement being anything but a local variation of the non-cooperation movement. In fact, under government instigation, the members of the Contai Union Board decided to revoke the licenses of all liquor shops in the area, as a concession to non-cooperation, and in order to detract Congress from the Union Board movement.[110] By seizing on Union Boards as the focal point of the non-cooperation movement, Sasmal and Congress were able to draw in a wide layer of people. This was particularly so in the case of minor zamindars and the jotedars who would have been adversely affected by the new taxes. Zamindars such as Srimati Kirenamani Dasi, Naranarayan Hazra, Devendra Narayan Hazra, Kishoripati Roy, Jagedish Chandra Maity and Shiv Prosad Jana were particularly useful in making Congress - sponsored hartals successful. Their role was crucial in the haths such as Durmuth, Gopalpur, Satmile, Mukundapur, Balishai and Barbaria, since Congress was still lacking in a cadre-based organisation.[111] However, in the towns, the Congress did not have to rely on influential brokers to establish its roots. The youth and students served as Congress volunteers helped by the lawyers. In Tamluk town for instance, the Congress under Kumar Chandra Jana was able to rope in 800 volunteers to spread the message of the movement.[112] A sizeable volunteer force also existed in Contai town and Mahisadal. These volunteers were regularly despatched to Calcutta to assist in the picketing there.[113] Moreover, the work among the Santhals in the Jungle Mahals (discussed in the next section) by Satcowripati Roy, Sailajananda Sen and Murari Mohan Roy had a profound impact on the Santhals of south Midnapur. When Charu Chandra Mohanti, the Secretary of the Potashpur Congress Committee was arrested, about 700 Santhals demonstrated in protest chanting 'Gandhi Majaraj Ki Jai' and 'Bande Mataram'.[114]

But unlike parts of the United Provinces, where a militant kisan movement outlived the non-cooperation movement, there was no corresponding radicalism in Midnapur. Although Congress was able to reach an audience far beyond the dwellers of small towns, this audience consisted in the main of various layers of peasant proprietors whose strong attachment

110. Nihar 15th March 1921.
111. Nihar 19th April, 22nd November and 27th December 1921.
112. Nihar 27th December 1921.
113. Nihar 10th January 1922.
114. Nihar 10th January 1922.

to property and land kept the movement within conservative, albeit militant, parameters. By making increased taxation the keynote of the movement, Congress was able to direct mass energies against the government without necessarily questioning the structures of indigenous society. Unlike the United Provinces where political mobilisation had been carried out on the basis of the land question and had consequently led to a degree of radicalism,[115] the mechanics of mobilisation in Midnapur negated this possibility. The Union Board movement enabled Congress to carve out a constituency for itself among that section of the rural population who had been enfranchised by the Government of India Act of 1919, on the basis of property. It is to this extent, that the non-cooperation movement broadened the political constituency in Midnapur.

The Santhal Movement in Midnapur 1918-1923

The non-cooperation movement was initiated by Gandhi at a time when Congress was far from being a streamlined political organisation capable of leading a mass campaign for Swaraj. There was no consciously thought out strategy employed by the Congress leadership and much was left to local initiative. The Congress central office was blissfully unaware of the shape of local movements, and was largely dependent on newspaper reports for information.[116] In Bengal however, the situation was not so chaotic. This was the result partially of the emergence of C. R. Das as the undisputed leader of the Bengal Congress, and of the policy of despatching trusted emmissaries to the districts to stir up things. This latter factor helped to ensure that the movement remained well within the control of the leadership and 'irresponsible' and 'anarchic' elements did not take over. The Contai Union Board movement, for example, was led by B.N.Sasmal and his followers who hailed from the small zamindars and jotedar section of rural property. But the form the non-cooperation movement assumed in the largely Santhal - populated regions of west Midnapur was a significant departure from the forms it took among the Bengali population.

115. D. N. Dhanagare, 'Congress and Agrarian Agitation in Oudh 1920-22 and 1930-32' South Asia 5, 1975.
116. AICC 5/1920.

Economic Condition of the Jungle Mahals

The Jungle Mahals, around which the Santhal upsurge was concentrated, were an area on the western and northern portions of the district. It encompassed the thanas of Binpur, Garbetta, Gopiballavpur, Jhargram and Salboni. The Jungle Mahals were divided among several large landowners, among whom were the Midnapur Zamindari Company, managed by Andrew Yule, whose holdings were scattered around Garbetta, Salboni and Silda pargana; the Ramgarh and Lalgarh Rajas west of the river Kasai; the Raja of Jhargram over the major portion of Jhargram thana; and the Rajas of Mayurbhanj and Murshidabad in extensive tracts in Gopiballavpur.[117]

Being essentially forest lands, they had been leased at very low rents in the 19th century. This way the zamindars hoped to attract settlers who would in time gradually reclaim the land. The terms of the lease generally included unhindered use of all the jungles including the right to cut down any trees for the purpose of timber or house construction. The jungles were then considered to have very little profit potential and the zamindars took only a cursory interest in them. The authorities too, did not see any future for the Jungle Mahals and the large pargana of Silda, covering 240 square miles, was assessed at only Rs 793-12-0 land revenue.[118]

A peculiarity of the Jungle Mahals, which stemmed out of the tribal community of the Santhals, Mahatos, Bhumijs and other tribes, was the mandali system. The 1883 Report of the Rent Law Commission defined mandals in the following terms:

> In parts of Midnapore bordering on the Jungle Mahals there is a class of persons termed mandals who came into existence in the following manner: the zamindar granted a tract of waste land to a substantial raiyat, termed as abadkar, who undertook to bring it into cultivation, paying the zamindar

117. Bengal District Gazetteers, Midnapore, Calcutta 1911, p.195.
118. A. K. Jameson, Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of Midnapore 1911-17, Calcutta 1918, p.57.

> a stipulated lump sum as rent. This abadkar, partly by the labour of his own family and dependents, and partly inducing other raiyats to settle under him, gradually reclaimed the greater part of the grant and established a village upon it, to which he usually gave his name and as the head of the settlement he was called mandel or headman. The zamindar and the mandal from time to time re-adjusted the terms of their bargain, but the zamindar never interfered between the mandal and his under-tenants. In settlement proceedings of 1839 these mandals were declared to have only the rights of sthani and khudkasht raiyats and not to be entitled to any munafa or profit; but though not exactly recognised as talukdars they gradually acquired rights superior to those of ordinary khudkasht raiyats; and as they were left to make their own terms with the raiyats settled by them, they must have had a very considerable profit besides what they obtained from any land cultivated by themselves. Their mandali right became transferable by custom.[119]

The status of the mandal within the village community was subject to local variations. A. K. Jameson wrote that "The mandal was in no way different from the other members except in so far as his superior social position allowed him to retain a larger area in his possession"[120] This was more or less the position in the Ramgarh estate where the mandal had the privilege of holding a small plot of land rent-free. Similarly, in the Jambani Estate, the mandal was allowed a deduction of Rs. 1 from his own rent as profit, but was forbidden from realising more than the fixed assessment from the other members of the community.[121]

However, by the beginning of the 20th century, the mandali system [illegible] started to break down in various parts of the district. Since the position of mandali was hereditary, many a mandal ceased to divide the rent equitably among other members of the community and started to make profits. This became more rampant after improvements in transport made

119. Ibid, pp. 40-1.
120. Ibid, p.41.
121. Ibid, pp. 41-2

timber a lucrative commercial proposition. At this point the zamindars who had been generous with their settlements clamped down on the Santhals. The mandals in turn became increasingly profit conscious and extracted as much as possible from the members of the community, thus weakening the old forms of relationship. In the zamindaris of the Midnapur Zamindari Company, there was also the phenomenon of the replacement of the traditional mandal by the Bengali mahajan. The latter, as the new mandal, was "concerned only to make the maximum of profit and caring little or nothing for the ancient rights of the community"[122]

The Zamindari Offensive

With the introduction of the railways the jungles of Midnapur acquired a new commercial value. Timber merchants, and especially the Midnapur Zamindari Company (hereafter referred to as the MZC), rushed in to lease or purchase large tracts of the jungles. The commercial value of the timber and the desire to make huge profits compelled the timber merchants to impose restrictions on the Santhals' use of the jungles. In 1923-24, the Jhargram Estate was richer by Rs 72,808-15-9 from the sale of jungle lands.[123] Under such circumstances the landlords felt the need severely to curtail the traditional right of the Santhals to have free access to the jungles, including the right to cut down any trees either for the purposes of clearing the land or for domestic use. Indeed from the 1890s the timber merchants began their offensive to regain control of the jungle lands.

In 1895, the MZC made a determined bid to curtail the jungle rights of the Santhals in pargana Bagri. The Company attempted to break down the pastoral rights of the Santhals and prevent them from grazing cattle in the jungles and waste lands. Led by enterprising mandals, the Santhals attempted to resist encroachment by filing suits in the Munsif's Court in Garbetta. The Munsif , and later the Sub-Judge in Midnapur ruled in favour of the Santhals. The MZC then decided to take the dispute to the High Court which overturned the earlier decisions.

122. Ibid, p.43.
123. Wards XX/10/1925 (MRR)

With amazing tenacity and some wealthy backing, the Santhals appealed to the Privy Council in England, which in 1903, reaffirmed their rights of pasturage.[124]

This temporary setback did not break the determination of the landlords to regain full control of the jungles. The Privy Council decision had after all been confined to pargana Bagri and the Santhals did not have the resources to conduct protracted litigation especially against such formidable opponents as the Managing Agency of Andrew Yule. Moreover, the local officials, especially of the Settlement Department, tended by and large to favour the landlords against the Santhals. A. K. Jameson while noting that "there is definite evidence in old mandali agreements that all land of every description was made over in absolute right to the community subject only to the yearly payment of rentfixed" also insisted that the extent of the right was "dependent on the circumstances in which it was granted"[125] It was therefore legitimate, in his view, for the landlords to attempt to change the terms of agreement with the Santhals. Jameson dismissed the Santhals' complaints and grievances with some degree of paternalistic arrogance:

> it is useless to expect ignorant cultivators to look to the good of the community as a whole (sic) when it conflicts with their immediate needs.[126]

Gurusaday Dutt, the District Magistrate of neighbouring Bankura district also insisted that the encroachments of the landlords were justified by 'unavoidable economic circumstances'[127] Thus it was with the active connivance and supervision of government officials that the encroachments on the jungle rights of the Santhals were carried out.

In the Silda pargana, owned by the MZC, the Settlement Department laid down the terms of the restrictions based on what they called 'reasonable precedents'. Under these terms, all trees with the exception of the Sâl tree were classed as valuable and the Santhals were forbidden to cut these down. They were allowed to cut trees which were "less than

124. Final Report, p.59.
125. Ibid, pp. 56-7
126. Ibid, p.58.
127. GOB H. Poll 181/1923 No. 34-5 (NMML).

1½ cubits in girth at a height of 3 feet from the ground and... only when required for construction of houses or agricultural implements or carts" Plus they were allowed to collect free all fallen leaves, brushwood, broken timber and fruits from the trees.[128] The same restrictions applied to the jungles in Garbetta.

Such relatively generous terms were absent in other parts of the district. In the Ramgarh and Lalgarh estates which were under the control of the two branches of the Sahasray family, only relatives and Brahmins were permitted to take wood for fuel and other uses without permission and payment. The Santhals and other tenants were compelled to pay between 4 and 6 annas per year per house for the right to collect brushwood alone. Even this right could be exercised only two days a week.

The situation was worse in all the other areas of the Jungle Mahals where tenants had to make payments for everything collected from the jungles including fallen leaves and brushwood. Only fruits from the trees and the mahua flower were given free; and even here the MZC charged a cess in their holdings in Salboni and Midnapur.[129] In the Jhargram Estate, which was under the Court of Wards, severe restrictions were imposed on all tenants holding temporary tenures. Their tenures were made non-heritable or transferable and they were forbidden from cutting trees, excavating tanks, wells, bunds and even building huts.[130]

Nor were the encroachments confined to the lucrative jungle area. In the Jungle Mahals there existed considerable areas of laterite soils on which nothing but coarse grass grew; these were called dahi lands. These lands were included in the original settlements with the mandals but were not taken into account while determining rent. The Santhals through their own perseverence did manage to cultivate patches of dahi lands through a method of shifting cultivation. Gradually they built small bunds around plots of dahi land to retain water, and converted these former waste lands into proper, but inferior paddy-growing

128. Final Report p.57.
129. Ibid, pp. 57-8.
130. R. K. Mandal, Manager Jhargram Estate, to Collector, 28th January 1918, Wards XX/14/1924-5 (MRR).

lands. The more enterprising tenants even cultivated indigo on these plots.

The landlords, and especially the MZC who had large interests in indigo, were quick to realise the rent potential of the dahi lands and began assessing the indigo plots for rent. After 1898 when indigo cultivation was stopped, the zamindars began assessing even those lands used for paddy cultivation.[131] In this way, every last ounce of surplus was extracted out of the Santhal tenants of the Jungle Mahals.

The connection of the Jungle Mahals by rail to the cities had therefore a profound impact on the lives of the Santhals. The zamindars who previously had paid scant attention to these isolated regions now swooped down in their bid for greater rent and profit. From a primitive patriarchal society, they were now exposed to the vagaries of the colonial market economy with little or no means to resist the change and erosion of their tradional ways. Their plight was not dissimilar to that of similar tribal societies facing the gradual onslaught of 'formal' capitalism and its revolutionary consequence.[132] Change brings in its wake reaction, and faced with this massive onslaught the Santhals reacted with a great degree of hostility. It only required the presence of an outside agency to harness the discontent for agitational ends.

Agitators and Local Rivals

By 1918, the economic dislocation among the tenants of the Jungle Mahals assumed serious proportions. Not only were their traditional jungle rights being threatened or taken away, but the soaring prices of paddy and every day items like cloth and kerosene hit them hard. Being constantly indebted to the mahajan, even those Santhals who had plots of land to cultivate, rarely had enough paddy in store to last until the next harvest or to sell their surplus at those moments when market conditions were most favourable to the seller. The sharp and dramatic price-rise of paddy after 1917 made this a rather difficult proposition.[133] The government tax programme did not help matters either. The collection

131. Final Report, pp. 59-60.
132. Ernesto Laclau, Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory, London 1979, p.25.
133. Report of the Bengal Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1929 - 30, Calcutta 1930, Vol. 2, pp. 118-28.

of the much hated chaukidari tax was left totally in the hands of the local Collecting Panchayats without supervision from superior officers. In the more remote areas of the Jungle Mahals, the Collecting Panchayats were a law unto themselves and usually in league with the local daroga. They assessed the Santhals at illegal and higher rates and even District Magistrates admitted that there had been wholesale cheating of the tribals.[134]

These factors produced an explosive situation by early 1918. As in the other parts of Bengal, the protest movements took the form of hath looting.[135] The lootings which occurred in January 1918 seems to have been the result of spontaneous action on the part of the Santhals and a few mandals, and conducted entirely without the help of the bhadrolok nationalists. The Santhals concentrated their attacks on the cloth merchants rather than the dhangolas (granaries) of the paikars (wholesale buyers). The cloth merchants, who generally hailed from up-country also carried on a substantial moneylending business among the Santhals, at very high rates of interest.[136] As such, they were the subject of certain resentment. Moreover, unlike the paikars, they were less protected and consequently more vulnerable. Secondly, though the lootings were mainly carried out by the Santhals, they were supported in many places by the Lodhas, Muslims and low caste Hindus, suggesting a generalised move by the underprivileged in society.[137] Lastly, though the participants were always Santhals, the hath lootings were not confined to the Jungle Mahals but fairly widespread in the district, a pointer to the important mobilising role of the tribe.[138]

Haths Looted in Midnapur in January 1918[139]

Lalpur Hath, Binpur
Mukundapur Hath, Debra
Salboni Hath, Kharagpur
Protapdighi Hath, Potashpur

134. Report by G. S. Dutt, 29th May 1923, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 No. 34-35 (NMML)
135. Nihar 25th December 1917.
136. Banking Enquiry Committee Vol 2, p.119.
137. Nihar 15th January 1918.
138. For a graphic description of tribal mobilisation see Report by G. S. Dutt, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML)
139. Nihar 8th, 15th and 22nd January 1918.

Satmile Hath, Contai
Junput Mela, Contai
Contai Town Hath
Sitalda Hath, Sabang
Balberia Hath, Nayagram
Kukrahati Hath, Tamluk
2 Haths in Gopiballavpur thana.

Although the hath lootings were stopped by adequate policing, the economic distress and the grievances of the Santhals remained. In fact the government displayed utter callousness towards the tribal population. The District Magistrate came to the myopic conclusion that lootings occurred in places where the "illiterate and the uncivilised people reside" He advised people in economic distress to join the Labour Corps in Mesopotamia where they could earn up to Rs 20 a month.[140]

In the face of such insensitivity, the task of stirring up the Santhals towards organised agitational politics became relatively easy. In 1921 when the Congress launched the non-cooperation movement, there was no Congress organisation in the Jhargram subdivision. Not unexpectedly, no attempt had been made to organise among the Santhals or other oppressed peoples. In early 1921, C. R. Das despatched Satcowripati Roy to Midnapur to organise political agitation in the district. After spending a brief period in Midnapur town, Roy went to Gidni. There he met a previous acquaintance Sailajananda Sen, whose father was a doctor in Midnapur town. Sen was an unsuccessful lawyer and spent his time smoking opium. Roy was successful in converting Sen into a nationalist, and the latter gave up drugs and devoted himself full-time to Congress work. Roy also got a relative of his - Murari Mohan Roy - to devote himself to the Congress movement. Together they set about the task of involving the Santhals in the non-cooperation movement.[141]

The genius of Roy and Sen as Congress organisers lay in their ability to utilise the specific economic grievances of the Santhals and harness it to the advantage of a national movement for freedom. Realising

140. Ibid 15th January 1918.
141. Satcowripati Roy 'Deshbandhur Sauge Panch Bathshar' Pranab XXXIX, 1.

that the crucial issue that faced the Santhals was the question of the erosion of their jungle rights, the Congressmen avoided any lofty preaching of abstract notions such as Swaraj and instead concentrated on 'bread and butter issues'. They were helped by the fact that the MZC owned most of the jungle tracts around Silda and Binpur. This enabled them to tie up the entire question of imperial subjugation with the specific problems faced by the Santhals. Thus at a large meeting of Santhals, Sailajananda Sen told his audience:

> their zamindars were English and Government helped them and did not punish them if they committed any offence, but punished natives for petty offences. Government were oppressive and their enemy and sucked their blood.[142]

Always emphasising the need for organised non-violent collective action, the Congress agitators, in the words of a report of the European-owned Midnapur Mining Syndicate, delivered many speeches "exciting the people to effect a strong combination against the European zamindars, and in infusing in them a false hope that if they stand combined these zamindars will not be allowed to exercise any act of possession in the jungles"[143]

But though Congressmen concentrated essentially on the local problems facing the Santhals, they did not totally ignore the wider political dimensions of the movement. The boycott of foreign goods, especially cloth, was constantly advocated by Sailajananda Sen and Murari Mohan Roy in their speeches.[144] Nor was Gandhian puritanism lacking in their appeals. In May 1921, the Congress was successful in organising a meeting of 700 Santhals at Gidni where it was resolved to abstain from drinking.[145] Gandhi too was projected as almost a messianic figure combatting the British oppression, so much so that in all their demonstrations the Santhals shouted the slogan of 'Gandhi Maharaji ki Jai'.[146] But on the whole, it is clear that the more politically overt aspects of the movement were assigned a secondary role.[147] In fact, in their flexibility

142. Case of Emperor vs Sailajananda Sen and Murari Mohan Roy, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 no. 36-7.
143. Petition of Midnapur Mining Syndicate, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).
144. GOB H. Poll 181/1923 no. 36-7.
145. Amrita Bazar Patrika 29th May 1921.
146. Disturbances in Binpur thana by L. Birley, 28th January 1922, GOB H. Poll 87/1922 no. 3.
147. Here I am accepting Lenin's distinction between 'political' and 'economistic'.

occasionally extending to opportunism, the Congress organisers were perfecting Lenin's advice of constantly 'bending the stick' while keeping the central project intact.

The initial attempts by Congress to organise among the Santhals were confined to the areas where the MZC held property. The non-cooperation movement was essentially nationalist, seeing its role as the attainment of political independence from the British. As such, it was quite permissable for Congress to challenge the might of an European Managing Agency. An agitation for economic gain was compatible with a nationalist movement because the enemy was European. But since the issue of Swaraj was not linked to a social revolution within indigenous society, the Congress leaders were reluctant to convert the movement for political independence into a class struggle. Hence in the Jungle Mahals, the Congress was less desirous of fanning the flames of agitation among the Santhal tenants of Indian zamindars, because of the implications of offending 'patriotic' landlords who had always been a significant force in the Bengal Congress, especially in East Bengal. The Congress attempted to localise and conceal under a nationalist veneer what was in essence a class struggle. Generalising the struggle ran the risk of offending allies, and unleashing a social force which they might not have succeeded in containing.[148]

However, it was the local factional alignments rather than the subjective desires of the Congress leadership that helped to shape the course of the Santhal agitation. The Congress agitators were outsiders and Bengalis with only a superficial knowledge of the Santhal way of life. They attempted to inject consciousness from the outside and found some ready response from a primitive people looking for some lead. But in a community where traditional loyalties were a significant factor to be reckoned with, they needed to create alliances with the indigenous leadership of the Santhals. This came from a rather unexpected quarter.

Besides the MZC, another major landholder in the area was Jagadish Chandra Dhabal Dev of the Jamboni Raj. Like all zamindars, he left the

148. For the experience in U.P. see D. N. Dhanagare, op.cit and M. H. Siddiqui, Agrarian Unrest in North India, Delhi 1978.

management of his estate in the hands of his Manager. The Manager through over-zealousness and corrupt practices, succeeded in making himself highly unpopular among the tenants. In particular, he succeeded in alienating the Satpatis (Brahmins) and the influential low caste Mahatos by imposing restrictions on their traditional jungle rights. Alongside this internal tension within the Jamboni Raj, the zamindar met with harassment from the neighbouring Dalbhoom Raj. The immediate cause was the defeat of the zamindar Pratap Dal of Dalbhoom in a succession case against Jambani Raj. Pratap Dal appealed to the High Court, and went around the area on a fund raising drive. He was assisted in this venture by the Mohunt of Ghatshila and the rival faction from within the Jamboni Raj.

If raising funds for his law suit was the sole reason for the feverish activities of Pratap Dal, it was certainly not the motive force of his many and varied supporters. The tenants of Jamboni Raj who had declaratory suits filed against them by the zamindar, Jagadish Chandra were keen to harass him in every possible way, in order to gain a bargaining lever against him. It was they who pressurised Pratap Dal to take up a more militant stance against the Jamboni Raj. According to reports received by James Pedie, the Additional District Magistrate:

> Pratap himself at a meeting where he was collecting money from the raiyats to fight his civil case, actually told them that if their jungles were being destroyed by the lessees to whom the jungle was let, it was their fault as they had merely to refuse work for those lessees in order to save their jungles. Again he promised them all sorts of rights in the jungles if they backed him by damaging the rival landlord and causing him trouble. The last was not said openly but indirectly, though perfectly clear to those who were present.[149]

J. E. Scott, the Deputy Commissioner of neighbouring Singbhum, also reported that tenants in the disputed area were assured by Pratap Dal that they would have their forest rights restored if he won the litigation.

149. Pedie's Tour Diary, GCB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).

Pratap Dal also made it clear that he had no objections to their obstructing contractors, cutting wood from the jungles, and fishing in the tanks of the area.[150] This declaration of Pratap Dal was interpreted by the Santhals as permission to plunder forests and tanks indiscriminately, coming as it did from a person they considered to be the owner.

Lastly, in their campaign to harass the Jamboni Raj, Pratap Dal and his supporters did not seek to keep the campaign confined to the area in dispute. The aid of Santhals from neighbouring Singbhum and Bankura districts was actively sought. Pratap Dal was also successful in enlisting the support of some maliks of bunds like Ananda Maity of Murathakura and Pitambar Singh of Raspal. Due to factional considerations, they supported the Santhal's movement for forest rights and addressed some meetings of Santhals. They contemplated limiting the movement to Midnapur so that it would not affect their interests in Bankura.[151]

The Santhal Agitation

The agitation in the Jungle Mahals began in Silda, owned by the MZC. The Santhal labour working for the Company in the jungles were paid dismal sums as wages. They received 4 pice for carting wood up to a distance of 14 miles and 8 pice for 35 miles. Satcowripati Roy, who was then personally supervising the movement, induced the Santhal labour to strike. The MZC responded in a heavy handed manner and attempted to force the Santhals back to work. A scuffle took place between the strikers and employees of the MZC, in which one employee was killed.[152] The Congress too responded militantly and directed the Santhals to plunder the forests in large combinations of a thousand people or more. The Santhals told the Company that they had full rights over the jungles and therefore could not be stopped. The MZC responded by going to Court demanding an injunction stating that the tenants had no rights in the jungles.[153] But before this injunction could be decided, the District Magistrate, Birley, intervened to try and settle the issue.

150. J. Graham to Cook, 9th May 1923, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).
151. G. S. Dutt to Commissioner, 7th-8th May 1923, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).
152. Satcowripati Roy, op.cit.
153. Petition of Midnapur Mining Syndicate, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).

Realising that the MZC exacted a large number of illegal cases from the tenants, Birley attempted to effect a compromise and nip the non-cooperation movement in the bud. It was a recognition, for the first time, from the government that there was some material basis to the Santhal agitation.

But Birley, by his own admission, failed to reach a settlement though he laid down the terms of what the MZC thought was a 'compromise'.[154] The Santhals refused to have anything to do with Birley's proposals, mainly on the insistence of Satcowripati Roy.[155] In fact, so popular was the appeal of the Congress that the MZC had to come to terms with it. The latter agreed to have a Congress worker inspecting the conditions of work in the jungles. Satcowripati Roy's own account of what happened is instructive. He even claimed that the Manager of the MZC took off his hat while passing the Congress office at Gidni.[156] In another description he suggested:

> the people did not cultivate lands. They asked why they should join hands with the government and cooperate with it. It so happened that even the Sub-Registrars office was empty. The people came to the Congress Office with deeds for the sale and transfer of lands. Those deeds were registered in the Congress Office. The Congress Office put its seal on those deeds and they were registered. The people did not go to the Registrars office for registering these deeds. We establish dhanagolas...The people put their surplus paddy in dhanagolas. Those people who had less paddy took paddy on loan from the dhanagolas and they used to return it...Even the Post Office work was stopped. Congress had its own Post Office...[157]

Some of this account is no doubt exaggerated - the organiser would be likely to succumb to the temptation of playing up his own success. But the account makes clear that Roy wished to suggest that he had effectively established a kind of 'dual power' to the British. Thus the local agitation was accommodated to the aims of the national movement. And

154. Report by L. Birley 28th January 1922, GOB H. Poll 87/1922 No. 3.
155. Graham to Cook, 9th May 1923, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).
156. Satcowripati Roy, op.cit.
157. Oral History Transcript No 267, p.22 (NMML).

indeed the Congress did more than merely fight against the oppression of the MZC. In one incident in July 1921, Sailajanada Sen led a demonstration of 200 Santhal women and blocked the path of paddy carts belonging to a local zamindar. They were protesting against the export of paddy in the face of local shortage.[158]

Inspired by this success at Silda and excited by the growing momentum of the non-cooperation movement nationally, the Congress turned its attention towards more politically overt forms of activity. Having won the allegiance of the Santhals as champions of their rights, it was relatively easier to mobilise them for other activities. In January 1922, the Congress mounted a campaign against foreign cloth. In one month, the Congress - inspired demonstrators raided four haths and destroyed all stocks of foreign cloth being sold. The assemblages were not very organised, and while raiding the Dahijuri hath, the Santhals destroyed all cloth indiscriminately. S. N. Gupta, the Joint Magistrate at Jhargram pointed out:

> It appears that what has happened is that the non-cooperators taking advantage of the occasion of these annual assemblages of large crowds of Santhals here, incited them to continue and to commit excesses ...anonymous written messages have been circulated inciting the Santhals to loot haths.[159]

Similarly, a crowd of 1,000 people assembled outside a court where four non-cooperators were being charged and tried. The sub-divisional officer adjourned the case, but set the bail at Rs 700 on each of the accused. This infuriated the crowd who demanded their immediate release. With only three constables at his disposal, the officer was reluctantly compelled to release the prisoners. "These people", he wrote to his superiors, "are completely out of hand and require to be shown that there is still a government"[160]

Unfortunately for the local organisers, just at the point when the particular agitation among the Santhal tenants of the MZC was being generalised along more political lines, Gandhi called off the movement.

158. Amrita Bazar Patrika 8th July 1921.
159. GOB H. Poll 87/1922.
160. GOB H. Poll 87/1922 No. 6.

If the events in Midnapur are any indicator, the growing militancy of the movement and the fear that it would slip out of the hands of the Congress leadership was one of the factors for Gandhi's sudden decision. This would also be confirmed by the Bardoli resolution of the Congress calling on the peasants to cease all movements against their landlords or no-rent campaigns.[161]

But the organisation of the Congress provided for a great deal of local initiative. Though the non-cooperation movement for the achievement of Swaraj was terminated in 1922, the local Congress leadership did not abide by the terms of the Bardoli resolution. The Santhal movement was temporarily thrown out of gear following the arrest of some of its prominent leaders, but resumed in full vigour in August 1922. The effect of the abandonment of the non-cooperation movement was that the struggle of the Santhals reverted to its original 'economistic' form and was divorced from the mainstream of nationalist politics. In political terms, this was a real setback.

With the Jamboni-Dalbhum feud coming into the open in late 1922, the Santhal unrest now covered the entire area from Jamboni to Silda and Ghatsila paragana in Singhbum; later it spilled over to a couple of thanas in Bankura district. Acting on the instigation of the Dalbhum faction, Santhals from Jamboni, Bankura, Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj began to loot fish from the tanks owned by Jagadish Chandra - the zamindar of Jamboni. The Santhals believed that they had a legitimate right to the fish since their actions were sanctioned by Pratap Dal. The crowds often numbered 6,000, and as in 1918, the Santhals were joined by Bengali small peasants and landless labourers such as Satgops, Tamils, Baishnavas, and, in one instance, even Muslims.[162] Although the Santhals were in the vanguard of the movement, they could count on the support of other economically depressed communities, suggesting the class aspect of the movement. But the mobilisation of the crowds coming from such remote areas as Singhbhum and Mayurbhanj was effected under the aegis of the tribe. Gurusaday Dutt, the District Magistrate

161. R. P. Dutt, India Today, Calcutta 1970, pp. 351-2, and J. H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal, Berkely 1968, pp. 224-22.
162. G. S. Dutt to Commissioner, 7th-8th May 1923, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).

of Bankura, gave a fascinating account of the process of mobilisation:

> The Santhals explained to us the interesting system by which they summon large crowds within a short time to any particular spot by sending out a 'gira' (knot). It appears that when the headman decide that a meeting is to take place for any purpose such as tank raids or the discussion of any grievances, the date of the meeting is communicated to each village by means of the withe of a plant or tree (generally from the bark of the Sâl tree) tied into knots. This knotted withe is called the gira and the number of knots in the gira indicate the day on which the meeting will take place. Whenever a meeting is decided upon any particular date for any object a gira is served out to the headman of neighbouring villages with the intimation of the object and the place of the meeting and it is considered the duty of the headman thus served with the gira to pass it on to the headman of the next village and then to communicate the information to all the Santhals of his own village. Tribal custom places an obligation on the Santhals of every village served with a gira to respond to it. Failure to respond to the gira is regarded as an offence against the tribe and is attended with severe tribal penalties.[163]

Along with the tribal nature of the mobilisation, there was also the economic motive too. In one particular instance, the crowd actually waited for the armed police to arrive, and then looted the tank saying:

> You can fire your last shot, We shall come and loot the tank. Many of us have come three days journey to get the fish and we are not going away without them.[164]

The lucrative nature of their haul, estimated by government at Rs 360 per tank, made it also worth their while to travel great distances and also explains why many non-Santhals joined in.[165]

163. GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).
164. Pedie's Tour Diary GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).
165. GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).

In the Silda pargana, where the movement was greatly controlled by the Congress rather than tribal leaders, the Santhals concentrated on looting the jungles of timber merchants. In the village of Raghunathpur, the police discovered that every household had stocks of newly cut wood. The wood was confiscated, but when the chaukidars attempted to cart it away, the Santhals forcibly prevented them. At another place, when Pedie and his armed police attempted to apprehend some of the Santhals his car was smashed up and he was given a beating: 'It is the first time I have had to run away and I did not like doing so; but there was nothing else possible.'[166]

When confronted by a large body of armed police, the Santhals merely retreated beyond the range of the guns and fired arrows into the police party if they advanced. In fact, so serious was the unrest that British officers in the area asked for a total of 450 armed policemen to be despatched.

The authorities were absolutely unable to explain the turbulence among the Santhals. Lok Khepe geche (the people have gone mad) seemed to be the commonest explanation.[167] Neither did the Congress or the Dalbhum faction quite control the actions of the crowd. From looting tanks or jungles belonging to the MZC or the Jamboni Raj, the Santhals began to loot indiscriminately. Some of the maliks in Bankura who had supported the movement had their tanks looted by the Santhals who had few illusions about private property. As the upsurge continued, the Santhals saw little difference in the nature of exploitation carried on by the Europeans and the Indian landlords. Where the Congress was in a stronger position this tendency was sought to be curbed by exacting protection money from the Indian owners. Jogendra Nath Ghose, the owner of jungle Chitamati was allowed to carry on his work unhampered after he paid Rs. 1000 to the Congress funds.[168] In fact, the Congress leadership did have some genuine grassroots support to keep the movement under check. This was displayed when after the arrest of the local Congress workers, not a single Santhal came forward to serve as witnesses for the prosecution, and instead some of them destroyed the MZC office at Kankrajora, killing one man and maiming another, after the arrest of Sailajananda Sen.[169]

166. Pedie's Tour Diary GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML)
167. Ibid
168. Petition of Midnapur Mining Syndicate, GOB H. Poll 181/1923 (NMML).
169. Ibid.

The movement was finally curbed by a combination of brute force, heavy punitive taxation, the appointment of almost all mandals as Special Constables responsible for law and order, and the forcing of Pratap Dal to pacify the Santhals. But besides official action, the Santhal movement suffered from political and national isolation. After the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement and the release of Congressmen from jail, the leadership of the Bengal Congress eschewed mass mobilisation and militant struggles in favour of a parliamentary programme. To the Congress leadership, the Santhals were merely a pawn in the power game involving them and the British rulers. The Midnapur District Congress under B. N. Sasmal offered little or no solidarity with the Santhals, though some protests were made against the imposition of punitive taxes after the movement had been crushed. It is to the credit of local leaders such as Sailajananda Sen and others that they continued the struggle which they had initiated, right to the bitter end. But on the other hand, as initiators of the movement, they maintained a rigid demarcation between 'leader' and 'led', and consequently failed to establish an indigenous political leadership from among the Santhal community. This political failure would result in the total demoralisation of Santhal militancy following the suppression of the movement.

Conclusion

The success of the nationalist leadership in its Gandhian phase lay in its ability to forge and cement together a host of local and regional expressions of dissidence. The primitivist - populist Gandhian ideology that lay behind the expression 'Swaraj' was used to serve the interests of various autonomous movements in India. These ranged from the struggles of the national bourgeoisie for a greater share of the home market, the Islamic fanaticism of Abdul Bari, the peasant movement of Baba Ramachandra, the exodus of coolie labour from Assam, and the struggle of the Santhals for jungle rights. Yet, while the Gandhian ideology ranged across class divisions in society, the precise organisational forms it took in various instances was determined by the objective class position of that social group.[170] Hence, while the Union Board movement grew out of the strife between competing factions, its organisation and its rigid

170. N. Mouzelis, 'Ideology and Class Politics, a Critique of Ernesto Laclau, New Left Review,' 112, pp.45-61.

adherence to non-violence was determined by the class position of its leadership and participants. Of particular importance was its 'pure' nationalism stemming from the relatively privileged position of the participants vis-à-vis land. No such conservative pulls existed in the case of the Santhals and their absolute alienation from the concept of private property, as postulated by western law, enabled the particular direction of the movement to take a more radical and militant course.[171] This militancy was to be fatal for its success in a rural society where the ultimate peasant ambition was to own a patch of land. It was this which alienated them from the nationalist Bengalis in other parts of the district. It was a tragic end to a brave but strategically suicidal movement.

171. In fact it is no accident that some of the most radical rural movements, e.g. Naxalbari, Srikakulam, Bhojpur, Debra-Gopiballavpur etc, have emerged from among the tribal community.

CONGRESS AND MIDNAPUR POLITICS 1922 - 1930

When Congress called off the non-cooperation movement following the outbreak of violence at Chauri Chaura, it was compelled to re-think its political strategy. While a small number of Gandhian die-hards remained intransigent, the majority of the Bengal Congress followed the lead of C. R. Das and set up the Swaraj Party within Congress.[1] The Swaraj Party had as its objective, active intervention in the reconstituted Bengal Legislative Council. B. N. Sasmal, having made quite a name for himself during the Contai Union Board agitation, was appointed a Provincial Organiser of the Swaraj Party[2] and a Director of its daily paper Forward;[3] Satcowripati Roy was also duly honoured and co-opted on to the Party General Council.[4]

The far reaching implications of the 1919 Government of India Act made a change in strategy imperative. Swarajists argued that the Congress decision to boycott Councils had not paralysed the operations of Dyarchy. "It has enabled the bureaucracy more than ever to further and consolidate its power through the help and active co-operation of a small albiet influential group of our countrymen"[5] This made it necessary to mount a campaign inside the Councils to isolate the government and make the reforms unworkable. At least on paper, the Swarajists had no intentions of being sucked into routine parliamentarianism. The hope was expressed "that the obstruction offered to the bureaucracy inside the legislatures would create a responsive echo outside and help prepare the necessary atmosphere for civil disobedience"[6] And as a sop to the Gandhians who would have nothing to do with Council-entry, Congressmen were called upon "to double their efforts to carry out the constructive programme of our great leader Mahatma Gandhi, by united endeavour to achieve Swaraj at the earliest possible moment."[7]

1. Das did not have a majority within the Bengal Congress initially, but did so by the beginning of 1923, J. H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society, Berkeley 1968, p.235.
2. AICC 13/1923.
3. Forward 25th October 1923.
4. AICC 14/1923.
5. Forward 27th October 1923.
6. Ibid, 21st May 1926.
7. AICC 5/1923.

The Franchise Revision

The franchise revisions of the 1919 Act had helped force this decision to enter the Councils. The new Act provided that payment of Rs. 1 or more as Public Works Cess, or Rs 2 as Chaukidari tax would qualify a person to vote in the elections to the Legislative Council. As a result, approximately 50,000 voters were registered in Midnapur district alone. By the government's own admission, the great mass of the rural electorate consisted of 'well to-do cultivators' with average holdings of more than 10 acres and paying a minimum total rent of Rs 32 at the rate of about Rs 3 an acre.[8] Similarly in 1919, the Government of Bengal in following through some of the recommendations of the Hobhouse Commission on Decentralisation, instituted the system of majority non-official control of District Boards and Local Boards. For Local Board elections, the property franchise qualifications was further reduced to the payment of Rs 1 Chaukidari tax.[9] The Bengal Village Self-Government Act stipulated that two-thirds of the members of District and Local Boards would be elected, and the rest nominated by the District Magistrate and the Divisional Commissioner. Moreover it was decreed that only non-officials could contest the posts of Chairman and Vice-Chairman. As a result of this new constitution, implemented in 1920, the Midnapur District Board had 22 members elected from the five subdivisional Local Boards and 11 nominated members.[10]

The franchise revisions and the changes in structure of the organs of local self-government meant that politicians aspiring to reach Calcutta had to possess a district base and some support among the considerably expanded electorate. To this end, work in and around the District Board was a useful qualification, especially as, since 1916, the resources at the disposal of the Board had been considerably enlarged. Hence the Congress declaration of 1922 that:

8. Indian Statutory Commission, Oral Evidence, Bengal Vol I, pp. 2-3.
9. Ibid, p.6.
10. Jud-Gen X/51/1921-2 (MRR).

> ...it is desirable for Non-Cooperators to seek election to Municipalities and District Boards or Local Boards with a view to facilitate the working of the Constructive Programme...[11]

This must also be seen in the context of the Swarajists Council offensive and C. R. Das' pipedream of controlling the vast resources of the Calcutta Corporation.

Congress and the District Board

Though Midnapur, along with Calcutta, Dacca and Mymensingh, were regarded as strong Congress districts, the Congress organisation in 1922 was still inadequate to cope with the rigours of electoral politics.[12] Sasmal, who had built up the Congress organisation in the district during the non-cooperation movement, had consciously avoided linking up the Congress with the established local notables such as Upendra Nath Maity, the Chairman of the Midnapur town municipality, or the Nanda family of Mugberia. Instead, the Midnapur District Congress Committee (DCC) was reconstituted in 1921 by inducting the new recruits from the non-cooperation movement - Sailajananda Sen, Nikunja Behari Maity, Kumar Jana, Ishwar Chandra Mal, Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, Satish Chandra Samanta and Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee.[13] It was an attempt to create not only a new leadership, but a leadership that would remain personally loyal to Sasmal. The significant exceptions to this trend were Mahendra Nath Maity, the leader of the Tamluk Bar, and Satcowripati Roy, who after 1923 drifted away to provincial Congress politics in Calcutta.

As a result of this weakness in Congress organisation, the party was compelled to make local adjustments for the 1922 Local Board and District Board elections. In the elections to the Tamluk Local Board, the Congress candidate, Mahendra Nath Maity, was defeated by Ishan

11. Report of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee 1922, p.104.
12. In 1924, the quota of Congress members for Midnapur was put at 52,234. Forward, 3rd February 1924.
13. N. N. Das, History of Midnapur, Part II, Calcutta 1962, p.85.

Chandra Mahapatra, a relatively unknown candidate, in the Nandigram constituency. Anxious to neutralise a potential source of opposition the Congress, which had a majority on the Local Board, offered the victor a place on the District Board in return for his cooperation.[14] In the Contai Local Board, in return for their votes in defeating the government lawyer, Devendra Narayan Mazumdar, in the election for Chairman, the Congress rewarded Barrister Rebati Nath Maity, Chittaranjan Ray and Girish Chandra Das, by having them elected to the District Board.[15] Similarly, in the Sadar Local Board, the Congress members helped to get Devendralal Khan, the zamindar of Narajole, on to the District Board. All in all, as a result of these electoral understandings, in the 1922 District Board, the Congress could reasonably claim the support of 14 elected members, of whom 5 were mere sympathisers.

An interesting feature of the 1922 Midnapur District Board was the fact that only three of the elected members - Devendralal Khan, Rebati Maity, and Mohini Mohan Das - had been members of the outgoing District Board. This augured well for the Congress, as it was possible for them to argue for a decisive break with the traditions of the old District Board.[16] It was for this reason that the Congress put up B. N. Sasmal for the post of Chairman against the veteran nominated member and government lawyer, Shital Prasad Ghose, who had served as Vice-Chairman in the past. The government officials were particularly upset over Sasmal's candidature, especially considering his past record of destroying Union Boards in the district . The District Magistrate H. Graham, and the Additional District Magistrate, James Pedie, personally put pressure on all non-Congress elected members, such as Devendralal Khan, to vote against Sasmal.[17] When Sasmal was ultimately elected on the casting vote of the Chairman, government officials did not hide their displeasure. A senior Civil Servant from Calcutta informed him:

14. Nihar, 29th July 1924.
15. Nihar, 12th December 1922, 1st July 1924, 29th July 1924. Hijli Hitaishi 4th July 1924.
16. See Chapter 2.
17. Das, op.cit. p.99.

> To be honest I can not say that I welcome your appointment as Chairman of the D.Bd Midnapore.[18]

The government could have used its discretionary powers to disapprove Sasmal's election, but with the Council elections coming up, they had no intention of jeopardising the future of the new constitution. But government hostility to Sasmal remained, and was to be a permanent feature during the Congress control of the District Board.

Official high-handedness was met by Congress populism. In 1928, the Swarajist daily, Forward, outlined the party's strategy towards institutions of local self-government:

> The foundations of Swaraj, what Deshbandhu called Swaraj for the masses will be firmly and securely laid if the Congress successfully carry out the work of capturing local bodies and administering them on nationalist lines. Indeed the capture of the (Calcutta) Corporation and promulgation of Daridra Narayan programme were never conceived as isolated actions. Deshbandhu had in mind the farsighted and inspiring idea of reconstructing our decadent village life, of tackling the urgent problems of rural health, sanitation and primary education and of broadcasting the Congress ideals of national freedom and self-reliance among the rural population, through the administration of the local bodies by the Congress party.[19]

Shorn of its rhetoric, this was a statement of intent that the Boards would be used for overtly political ends and the propagation of nationalist politics. Yet this is precisely what the Congress-controlled Boards in most districts did not do.[20] An official report published in 1927, noted with some satisfaction that wherever Swarajists controlled the Local or District Boards they worked just as their non-party predecessors had done, and "practically nowhere was there in consequence any marked change in the methods or spirit

18. P. Pal, Deshapran Sasmal, Calcutta 1368 B.S., p.95.
19. Forward, 23rd June 1928.
20. For a defence of the Congress performance, particularly in the Calcutta Corporation, see Rajat Ray, 'Historical Roots of the Crisis of Calcutta, 1876-1939' E.P.W., 21st July 1979. pp. 1206 - 11.

of administration, or any attempts to injure the local institutions of which they were members" The only exception to this trend, the report noted, was the Midnapur District Board.[21] This District Board, according to the government, "has been used for some time as an instrument of Congress propaganda"[22]

The uniqueness of the Midnapur strategy, perfected by Sasmal, lay in using the District and Local Boards for purely and overtly political objectives i.e. building the Congress party and forcing occasional and tactical confrontations with the government. The attainment of power within the Boards by the Congress was not seen as an end in itself, but as a means to further the cause of the nationalist movement through mass mobilisation and development of a class base.[23]

Confrontations with the government, some real and others forced were an essential element of Congress strategy, especially in the period 1922-25 when Congress did not have an overall majority in the District Board. In 1923, the Governor, Lord Lytton, came on an official visit to Midnapur. At a District Board Meeting, Devendralal Khan suggested that the District Board should present an address to him. But Sasmal, as Chairman, had other ideas. In a ruling he declared:

> We can discuss only those matters which are within the province of this Board. It is really common sense but it has also been laid down in Rule 6 of the Model Rules. The presenting of an address to His Excellency has not been provided in the Local Self-Government Act...[24]

He therefore ruled the request out of order. Upon this 18 of the 31 members present walked out in protest and a nominated member, Dwijadas Bhaduri, Manager of the Raja of Mayurbhanj's estate, gave notice of a no-confidence motion against Sasmal.

21. Report of the Working of the Reformed Constitution 1927, Calcutta 1928, pp. 163-4.
22. F. R. June (1) 1930, GOI H. Poll 18/VII/1930.
23. There is an apparent similarity between the Midnapur Congress strategy and the current C.P.I-M. strategy in W. Bengal, as regards Panchayats. Promode Dasgupta, 'Interview', Perspective, I,12,July 1978, p.13.
24. D. B. Progs, 30th November 1923.
25. Ibid, 29th April 1924.

Although from a strictly legal point of view, Sasmal was clearly in the wrong,[26] the no-confidence motion allowed him scope to turn the tables on his opponents. The Congress machinery in the district was quickly mobilised. At least 78 public meetings were held in the district to pledge support for Sasmal.[27] These meetings did not discuss the rights or wrongs of Sasmal's ruling, but the right of unrepresentative nominated members to exist at all, let alone their right to challenge an elected Chairman.[28] Also significant was the fact that Congress members in the Ghatal and Sadar Local Board succeeded in winning motions mandating their representatives to support Sasmal.[29] This was intended to serve as a direct challenge to Devendralal Khan, who although an elected member, was opposed to Sasmal on this point, more so since he had hosted a reception in honour of Lord Lytton at his Gope Palace. In an obvious reference to Devendralal, Forward declared:

> It remains to be seen if after this, the Sadar Local Board delegates to the District Board go against the wishes of their constituency and court a well merited vote of no-confidence on them.[30]

By appealing to the electorate directly, the Congress was achieving two results. Firstly, they were breaking new ground by taking the affairs of the District Board out to the voters and thereby creating and consolidating a political base that would serve them in future elections. Secondly, by generating an outcry against nominated members, they were linking up the local affairs of Midnapur to the energetic campaign then being waged by C. R. Das inside the Legislative Council, against Dyarchy. In this, Sasmal was also pandering to the sentiments of the rank-and-file Congress members who needed a focus of activity in the absence of agitational politics.

The Congress campaign clearly took the government by some surprise.

26. GOB H. Poll 419/1923 (WBSA).
27. P. Pal, op.cit, pp. 101-5.
28. Forward, 23rd-30th April 1924.
29. D. B. Progs, 29th April 1924.
30. Forward, 29th April 1924.

Seeing the growing public interest in the matter, the officers at Calcutta issued instructions that though Sasmal was clearly in the wrong, it was 'inadvisable' to take any further action.[31] Consequently Dwijadas Bhaduri moved in the District Board that he wished to withdraw his motion. Congress members, adding insult to injury, permitted Bhaduri to withdraw his motion only on an assurance that he would not introduce similar motions in future.[32]

As Chairman of the District Board at a period when Congress was in a clear minority, Sasmal's main preoccupation was to be able sufficiently to utilise the full resources of the Board with a view to improving the electoral prospects for the party in 1925. Whereas past Chairmen or Vice-Chairmen of the Board, such as Atal Behari Sinha and Dr. Abdullah Suhrawardy, had distinguished themselves by crude nepotism and utter indifference respectively, Sasmal threw himself energetically into the job.

The pre-Congress District Boards had been singularly lax in their implementation of such essential works as rural water supply. This was in a district where most villages did not have proper drinking water and where malaria was rampant. Between 1919 and 1921, the District Board excavated a total of only 11 new tanks on their own initiative.[33] Within months of the Congress capturing the District Board, the sanctioned expenditure on drinking water was raised from Rs 48,000 to Rs 100,000,[34] and between 1923 and 1925, 282 tanks were excavated by the District Board.[35] Moreover, in a public statement, Sasmal warned all the District Board members that the Board would not help in the excavation of tanks for them or their relatives. The site of the new tank would be decided after consulting local opinion.[36] Whether such lofty sentiments were actually translated into practice or not, Sasmal consciously strove to give the District Board a new and dynamic image. In another move, clearly linked to the Congress bid to wrest the Midnapur town Municipality from the hands of Upendra Nath

31. GOB H. Poll 419/1923 (WBSA).
32. D. B. Progs, 29th April 1924.
33. BLC Progs, VII, 1, 1922, p.6.
34. Nihar 13th November 1923.
35. P. Pal, op.cit, pp. 97-101.
36. Nihar, 2nd December 1924.

Maity, Sasmal sanctioned a sum of Rs. 50,000 towards the building of water works for the town.[37]

Rural health and sanitation was the other major area of Congress initiative. In 1922, before Sasmal took over, the District Board expenditure on health was Rs. 53, 282 and there were 7 dispensaries run by the Board; by 1925, the sanctioned expenditure had risen by about 100% to Rs 105,985 and the number of dispensaries to 21.[38] The setting up of dispensaries in rural areas was an essential element of the Congress strategy. Besides enabling modern medicine to reach a relatively wider layer of people, the establishment of dispensaries was accompanied by the formation of dispensary committees who collectively ran the establishments. The members of the local committees were nominated by the District Board, and Congress members ensured that local notables, mainly the smaller zamindars and jotedars were coopted into the committees alongside some government functionaries and local Congress members. This move enabled Congress to establish direct liason with important sections of the landholders, involve them in the District Board network and therefore secure them as potential allies for Congress election campaigns.

Since the growth and expansion of the Congress party was the central element of their strategy, Congress members jealously guarded against all government inspired initiatives in the rural areas. Sasmal made it clear that Congress was opposed to societies like irrigation societies or anti-malarial societies being set up under government supervision, as he was apprehensive of their being turned into centres of opposition to what he described as the 'independent exertions of the people'[39] Instead, health committees staffed almost exclusively by enthusiastic young Congress volunteers were set up with the aid of funds from the District Board.[40] In Contai, an anti-malarial society was established by Ishwar Chandra Mal, the secretary of the Contai Congress Committee, with a grant of Rs 5,000 from the District Board. The society and its volunteers went out to remote areas to destroy overgrown jungles and take steps to stop the breeding of mosquitoes in stagnant water. While there, they organised political meetings and often helped to set up

37. Forward, 18th December 1924.
38. P. Pal, op.cit, pp. 97-101.
39. Forward, 27th May 1924.
40. Hijli Hitaishi, 22nd August 1924.

a local Congress branch.[41] This strategy of social work was an integral part of the Midnapur Congress' 'constructive programme' and attracted villagers towards the Congress as an organisation that was responsive to their needs.

Faced with a strategy that was dedicated to the building of the Congress party, opponents naturally attempted to mount a campaign to discredit the party and its leaders. In Midnapur, ammunition for this was not lacking. Though an energetic Chairman, Sasmal was not above corruption and nepotism. It is difficult to ascertain how many of these cases were the result of Sasmal's own arbitrary action or the result of a collective Congress decision, since the attacks of the opposition were concentrated on Sasmal in person.

In December 1924, Rai Shital Prasad Ghose Bahadur, a nominated member, raised the issue of nepotism in the contracts for the purchase of medicines for District Board dispensaries. In July 1924, Sasmal had passed an order terminating the contract of Messrs. B. K. Paul and Company and had instead given the order to one Nagendra Mohan Bose, a local lawyer with Congress sympathies. This was in spite of the fact that the tender submitted by Bose would cost the District Board at least Rs 2,000 more than two other quotations. Moreover, Bose had no previous experience in distributing medicines.[42] It was also revealed subsequently that Bose, using the name of the District Health Officer had successfully managed to get medicines at a cheap price from the Alipore Juvenile Jail in Calcutta and had sold them to the District Board at a small profit.[43] It should be noted, however, that the opposing members of the Board were themselves acting at the behest of the ousted contractor.[44]

There was also evidence to suggest that Sasmal was guilty of nepotism by distributing key contracts to friends and relatives. There was the case of one Nilkanta Maity, a road contractor whose bills were handled personally by Sasmal and whose road repairs left much to be desired.[45]

41. Nihar, 2nd December 1924 and 16th June 1925.
42. D. B. Progs, 23rd December 1924, 14th February 1925, 30th July 1925.
43. Hijli Hitaishi, 21st August 1925.
44. D. B. Progs, 14th February 1925 (later expunged from the minutes).
45. Hijli Hitaishi, 23rd October 1925.

Further, at the key Petuaghat ferry crossing where fifty people were drowned in 1925 as a result of the overloading of boats, it was discovered that two of the responsible contractors, Gyanendra Nath Sasmal and Nabakumar Manna, were close associates of Sasmal.[46] A report prepared by the Inspector of Local Works, W. J. Carr, noted that personnel in charge of the roads in four of the Local Boards did not possess the requisite qualifications.[47] In the Contai Local Board, the Chairman, Bepin Behari Sasmal, the elder brother of B. N. Sasmal, was accused of "spending money recklessly without any regard to the fact that he is answerable to the Board"[48] But the most serious allegation which prompted government action was in the case of the appointment of the District Engineer. In 1924, the District Board sanctioned the appointment of B.B. Dutt, the son of Barrister K.B.Dutt, as District Engineer in spite of the fact that he was not qualified for this important job.[49] However, Sasmal justified the appointment of this unqualified person on the grounds that he would be receiving Rs 100 less than the stipulated salary. He saw government objections as another example of how the system of Dyarchy patronised 'white elephants' by paying them high salaries which could otherwise be utilised on 'public benefits'. "It is really strange" it was said in Congress circles, "that under the present system of local self-government the District Board cannot even appoint an officer at its own discretion"[50]

Accusations of corruption and nepotism formed the major plank of the campaign by the opposition, but did not carry much weight with the electorate. This had less to do with the validity of the charges than with the credibility of the accusers. Within the District Board, the main opposition to the Congress was led by two nominated members, Rai Shital Prasad Ghose Bahadur and Rai Manmatha Nath Bose Bahadur, both government lawyers. Besides the fact that they were too closely linked to the District Magistrates,[51] their handling of District Board affairs before 1922 had not won them any universal praise.

46. Ibid, 23rd December 1926.
47. Ibid, 2nd June 1927.
48. Ibid, 6th June 1924.
49. Ibid, 1st July 1926.
50. Forward 18th December 1924.
51. The Khas Mulakati List noted that they were always "at the service of the Magistrate". GOB H. Poll 10/1926 (WBSA).

A second opposition bloc operated from Contai town and published a weekly paper, Hijli Hitaishi. This was led by two local pleaders, Abanti Charan Maity and Nagendra Nath Bakshi, both of whom were active in opposing the anti-Union Board agitation of 1921.[52] The group also had the support of Sruti Nath Chakravarty, the Headmaster of Hamilton School, Tamluk, and Gyanada Charen Bose, a retired government servant residing at Contai.[53] As the Congress consolidated their hold on the District Board this group was joined by disaffected Congressmen. Barrister Rebati Nath Maity and Chittaranjan Ray joined after Sasmal threw them out of the Congress group in the District Board for disobeying a mandate.[54] Jagadish Chandra Maity, the Headmaster of Kalagechia National School joined after the Contai Congress Committee opposed his arbitrary decision to convert the National School into a Government English-medium school.[55] The main financial backing of the group came from the Hari Sabha temple which they ran in Contai town, and from the Nanda family, the zamindars of Mugberia. The Nandas, who were previously associated with the zamindar nationalist grouping around Raja Narendra Lal Khan of Narajole, broke away from the Congress after the District Board decided to levy a road tax on bus operators; the Nandas ran a major bus company in Midnapur.[56]

The weakness of the opposition groupings, besides the obvious disadvantage of being too closely linked with the government, lay in their lack of a party organisation. They comprised a motley mob of Loyalists, responsivists, disgruntled Congressmen and plain opportunists who lacked any common political perspective besides a mutual hatred of Sasmal and the Midnapur Congress. As a result, during the Local Board elections of 1925, they concentrated their propaganda against Congress misrule. When they offered any alternative, it was normally a call to voters to elect candidates "absolutely on the basis of their individual affiliations"[57] But they clearly made a tactical blunder by attempting to project Congress as a sort of Bolshevik organisation

52. See Chapter 5.
53. GOB H. Poll 80/1921 (WBSA).
54. Hijli Hitaishi, 4th July 1924.
55. Nihar, 6th October 1925.
56. Nihar, 7th April 1925, 16th June 1925.
57. Hijli Hitaishi, 7th August 1925.

determined to end the influence of men of wealth in politics:

> But a section,.. on seeing these well-to-do people in the Congress are saying to the masses: 'The Congress is about to be ruined; the poor man's Congress has become the rich man's Congress; the Congress flag is lying at the feet of rich men. We ask whether the National Congress is only the poor man's party and not the rich man's too? The rich, poor, educated, uneducated, zamindar, peasant, Hindu, Muslim, Jain, Christian, all embrace under the Congress flag to fight together for the freedom of the motherland. Those who wish to exclude the rich do not realise that without the blessings of Lakshmi the Congress movement cannot survive.[58]

The opposition was clearly unaware of the implications of the franchise revisions which had broadened the electorate substantially to include more than just the zamindars and the mofussil professionals.

The Congress propaganda in the Local Board elections was more coordinated. The main thrust of the campaign was to point to the tangible benefits received by the people since they took over the District Board. Thus the voters at Contai were reminded of the huge grants given for the establishment of charitable dispensaries, anti-malaria programmes, drinking water and the construction of a burning-ghat.[59] But these were also linked to the overall Congress movement and the struggle for independence. Nikunja Behari Maity, in an article to the local paper wrote:

> The time has come in our district to take over the responsibility of the Local Board. But who is fit to undertake this task? Who will our countrymen give this responsibility to? Those cowards who pander to the whims

58. Ibid, 11th November 1926.
59. Nihar, 2nd December 1924.

> of the foreign bureaucracy, or those courageous, patriotic Congress workers? Those who are slothful and lethargic, or those who half-starved and hungry have gone from field to field, from village to village, working for the good of the country?[60]

The Congress campaign was also helped by the fact that Devendralal Khan had for the moment patched up his differences with the local Congress leadership and had agreed to support their election. Lastly, Sasmal himself left nothing to chance and personally travelled a distance of 2,000 miles, speaking at about a hundred election meetings.[61]

The results justified his efforts, as the Congress won a landslide victory. Congress candidates won all the elected seats in the Jhargram, Contai, Tamluk and Ghatal Local Boards; in the Sadar Local Board, they won 19 of the 20 seats. Prominent opposition members such as Upendra Nath Maity, Kailash Chandra Bhunia, Dwijadas Bhaduri, Mahmood Suhrawardy, Chittaranjan Ray and Abanti Kumar Maity were humbled in the polls. The scale of the Congress victory can be gauged by the fact that in Contai town, of the 1,200 votes cast, 1,100 were in favour of the Congress candidate; in Keshpur thana, Bijoy Krishna Khan, the brother of Devendralal Khan, polled 679 votes against his sole opponent who got 47 (also see Table 6:1).[62] With a clear majority in the Local Boards Congress candidates were elected to all the 22 elected seats in the District Board.

Sasmal and Congress re-entered the District Board in 1926 in a jubilant and aggressive mood. Whereas the government consistently held the view that "his administration was extravagent, autocratic and unconstitutional"[63] Sasmal was clearly of the view that the elections had vindicated his approach and was in no mood to succumb to governmental pressure. The government was particularly anxious to enlist the support of Sasmal in their renewed bid to introduce Union Boards into Midnapur. But the Congress in Midnapur made their views clear to the government in early April, 1926:

60. Ibid, 21st July 1925.
61. Forward, 28th October 1925
62. Ibid, 28th October 1925.
63. Report of the Working [illegible] of the Reformed Constitution 1927 pp. 162-3.

TABLE 6:1

Results of the Contai Local Board Elections, 1925

Thana	Seats	Congress	%	Opposition	%
Contai	4	4,541	94.38	270	5.6
Ramnagar	2	639	86.58	99	13.4
Khejuri	3	2,808	79.84	709	20.15
Patashpur	3	2,266	80.35	554	19.94
Egra	3	1,306	62.33	789	37.66
Bhagwanpur	3	2,168	88.56	280	11.43
TOTAL	18	13,728	83.50	2,701	16.40

(Source: Nihar, 27th October 1925)

> A Village Self-Government Act does not by itself impart self-government to a village; the deception in the present instance is so thin and transparent that even ignorant and illiterate village masses in their placid and pathetic contentment may be credited with intelligence enough to discover it. The Midnapore rout should have imparted its lesson to the Bengal bureaucracy. The latter should have been convinced that its peaceful penetration into the hitherto unconquered or uncontrolled village life is not to be welcomed there...The advertised 'democratisation' of village life is in reality a sinister attempt at its bureaucratisation... The poor villager cannot have time or inclination to bother much about your cumbrous dissertations on 'Self-Government' or other government, specially about that particular type of village Self-Government which is patented by the District Magistrate and administered by the village chaukidar.[64]

Indeed, the tone of the reply made it quite clear that the Midnapur Congress was not prepared even to negotiate with the government.

The government too had limited options. The overwhelming Congress victory at the polls had clearly shattered any hopes the government might have had of replacing the party 'democratically'. On 28th April 1926, the new District Board met and re-elected Sasmal as Chairman. But government still held the trump card. The Local Self-Government Act stipulated that the election of the Chairman had to be approved by the Minister in charge of that department, and government threatened to use this as a lever against Sasmal in a bid to get him to change his ways, especially on the question of the appointment of the 'unqualified' District Engineer.[65] The Divisional Commissioner wrote to Sasmal on the 28th May asking for a meeting. The latter overwhelmed by his electoral success wrote back that he was a busy man and, in any case, preferred to settle the matter in writing.[66]

The government was not alone in wanting to rid Midnapur of Sasmal. They found unexpected allies in the Congress circles in Calcutta, led by the

64. Forward, 1st April 1926.
65. Indian Statutory Commission, Oral Evidence, Bengal Vol I, Evidence of J. G. Drummond, Secy L.S.G. Dept. p.43
66. Forward, 14th July 1926.

ex-terrorist Karmi Sangh who were angry over Sasmal's speech at the Krishnanagar Provincial Conference, where he had strongly criticised the methods of the terrorists. The Karmi Sangh was also strongly egged on by Dr. B. C. Roy who wanted his friend Devendralal Khan to contest the Midnapur North seat for the Legislative Council instead of Sasmal.[67] Apparently having noticed these striking developments outside Midnapur, the government issued a notification on 12th July 1926, declaring without reason that they had not approved B. N. Sasmal's election and that they nominated Devendralal Khan as Chairman.[68]

The appointment of Devendralal Khan as Chairman was received with howls of protest from the local Congress. At a meeting of all Congress members of Local Boards and the District Board, a motion was passed condemning the action of government and calling upon Devendralal to resign his post.[69] But Devendralal was in no mood to oblige. He first denied that he was ever involved with the Congress in any way and questioned the right of the Midnapur DCC to speak for the district.[70] In the face of overwhelming Congress hostility, Devendralal attempted to regroup all the old opposition forces in the district. When he visited Contai town in September 1926, he was accompanied by Upendra Nath Maity, Rebati Nath Maity and Chittaranjan Ray; the local Congress attempted to call a <u>hartal</u> against his visit.[71] Events took a more bizarre turn when thanks to the intervention of senior Congress leaders in Calcutta, Devendralal Khan, along with Rebati Nath Maity and Gangadhar Nanda of Mugberia, was given the Congress nomination for the ensuing elections to the Legislative Council. The Midnapur Congress had no option but to set up their own 'rebel' candidates.[72]

Within the District Board, Devendralal faced surprisingly little opposition. He allowed the Congress majority to record the District Board's disapproval of the government's conduct and therefore neutralised the immediate discontent.[73] His position was strengthened by the government's adamant refusal to re-consider its decision on Sasmal.

67. This is discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section.
68. <u>Forward</u>, 29th July 1926.
69. Ibid, 7th August 1926.
70. <u>Hijli Hitaishi</u>, 29th July 1926.
71. Ibid, 30th September 1926.
72. This is discussed in greater detail below.

Moreover, Devendralal's acceptance as a Congress candidate legitimised his own position and also split the Midnapur Congress, at least in the Sadar region. The pro-Sasmal lobby had to reconcile itself to the bitter fact that the government was not going to concede their case, and that they were powerless to do anything else especially after Sasmal's defeat in the Legislative Council elections.

As Chairman of the District Board, Devendralal attempted to reverse some of the steps taken by Sasmal. He dismissed from District Board employment various staff members known to have been appointed by Sasmal personally.[74] More significant, he made life difficult for those Local Boards who were known for their opposition to him. By January 1927, the Contai Local Board claimed they had received a mere Rs 8,500 grant from the District Board as opposed to Rs 61,500 in the previous year.[75] Moreover, in spite of the fact that there was an epidemic of smallpox and cholera waging in Contai, Devendralal reversed the previous District Board decision to appoint vaccinators locally and decided to send them down from Midnapur town, the district headquarters, where his supporters were concentrated.[76] In fact, four months after the epidemic outbreak vaccinators still had not been sent and it required the local M.L.C., Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, to bring the Director of the Health Department to Contai, before 20 vaccinators were actually sent.[77] But by and large, Devendralal, after winning his election to the Legislative Council, lost interest in his job at the District Board. Whereas, in 1924-25, Sasmal had spent 74 days in the year touring the district, Devendralal spent a mere 8.[78] In fact, by the beginning of the summer season of 1927, Devendralal was off on leave, holidaying in Europe.[79] In 1928, he resigned his seat on the District Board.[80] With Devendralal Khan fading away from district politics, and there being no other elected member who would willingly accept the mantle of 'nominated' Chairman, the government had no option than to restore to the Midnapur District Board, in July 1927, the right to have an elected Chairman. In the event, Sasmal too withdrew from the mainstream of Midnapur politics,

73. D.B. Progs, 7th August 1926.
74. Hijli Hitaishi, 16th December 1926.
75. Nihar, 21st December 1926. 4th January 1927.
76. Ibid, 21st December 1926.
77. Ibid, 29th March 1927, 5th April 1927.
78. Jud-Gen XX/57/1926 (MRR).
79. Nihar, 17th April 1927.
80. Ibid, 1st May 1928.

and Kishoripati Roy was elected.

Though Kishoripati Roy was formally the Chairman, real power in the District Board was exercised by Atul Chandra Bose, the Vice-Chairman.[81] Under him the pattern of District Board activity initiated by Sasmal was resumed, now with an overwhelmingly Congress majority. More than ever before, the Congress members in the Boards showed scant respect for statutory rules and regulations. By transferring the entire proceeds of the Roads and Public Works Cess to the District Board, the government had hoped to transfer also the onus for the upkeep and expansion of the Imperial Works. Moreover, they gave the District Board almost unlimited powers of taxation in the belief that taxes imposed by local elected members would be less likely to provoke political unrest than those imposed by an alien government, but the Congress members in Midnapur refused to play this game.

The Midnapur District Board continued to spend the greater proportion of its income on social services such as health and education, much to the displeasure of the officials who were more concerned with such 'essential' items as communications.[82] Moreover, the local rates imposed by the District Board remained more or less constant during the 1920's (see Table 6:2). What irked the officials even more was that the most elementary rules of accountancy were disregarded by the District Board, so much so that budget headings were rarely observed.[83] When the District Engineer, who was a confidant of the District Magistrate, complained about the irregularities, Congress members immediately had him suspended for insubordination.[84] So recklessly had Congress members overspent that at the end of 1929-30, the District Board had liabilities in arrears amounting to Rs 115,000, which seemed too great a sum to officials familiar with very conservative budgeting.[85] The start of the Civil Disobedience movement therefore must have come as a relief to the government authorities, In 1930, correctly gauging that the District Board could be used as a centre for anti-government activities, the authorities superseded the Board and

81. Interview with S. K. Gupta, 30th July 1978.
82. Jud-Gen XIV/50/1930 (MRR).
83. Ibid and Jud-Gen XVI/50/1931 (MRR).
84. D.B. Progs 2nd March 1930 and Interview with S.K.Gupta 30th July 1978.
85. Jud-Gen XIV/50/1931 (MRR).

appointed James Pedie, the District Magistrate, as Chairman.[86]

The Congress performance in the District Board and Local Boards raises certain important questions that have considerable significance in the study of political mobilisation. To what extent was the Congress success in Midnapur dependent on their ability to dispense patronage through the organs of local self-government? To begin with, it must be noted, that certain historians have used 'patronage' in an all-embracing pejorative sense and have confused corrupt dealings with the normal practice of catering to the needs of the constituents.[87] Also underlying their research is a rather naive belief in the ideal of a selfless, altruistic politician who would do nothing to build up his personal following or that of his political party; the model of this politician is almost akin to the caricature of the impartial (sic) nameless and faceless bureaucrat. Moreover, this belief is compounded with the assumption that doling out favours in the shape of contracts, grants or jobs to a few people is adequate to win the votes of the electorate. Had this been the pattern of political behaviour in India, then neither the Justice Party in pre-independent Madras Presidency nor the Congress party in post-independent West Bengal could have been removed from governmental office. 'Patronage politics' in itself is not an adequate criterion for the retention and perpetuation of political support, even under the conditions of the 1919 property franchise.

At the hearings of the Indian Statutory Commission, which the Congress boycotted, Khan Bahadur Azizul Huque, giving evidence on behalf of the 'Representatives of Rural Interests from West Bengal', said:

> ...today you will find that society has become much more complex and much more advanced, with the result that every District Board in Bengal is in chronic financial poverty, both constitutionally as well as in regard to financial powers.[88]

These sentiments were reiterated by Maulvi Abul Kasem, who while agreeing

86. GOI H. Poll 248/1930 (NAI).
87. See especially C. J. Baker, The Politics of South India 1920-37 Delhi 1976, pp. 118-31.
88. Indian Statutory Commission, Oral Evidence, Bengal, Vol. 2, 12th meeting, p.22.

that District Boards had enlarged their powers, noted:

> but unless they get financial aid, how are they going to exercise these powers or improve what they do?[89]

What emerges from these statements is the fact that District Boards although endowed with adequate, formal, constitutional powers, did not possess the necessary financial resources to cope with the magnitude of their task. Thus, though the number of dispensaries in the district rose from 14 in 1910-11 to 40 in 1930-31, and the number of out-patients rose by 183% to 271,998 in the corresponding period, health facilities in Midnapur were pitifully inadequate; the number of hospital beds in the district actually fell from 140 to 138, i.e. one hospital bed per 73,660 of the population in 1931. Lavish spending in education resulted in a 34.4% increase in the number of pupils in District Board/government-aided institutions between 1921-22 and 1930-31, but there were only 2 colleges, 43 high schools and 109 middle schools in the district. In the absence of a self-financing private sector, grants from government and/or the District Board were essential for the development of education and the social services.[90] Yet, in more then a hundred years of direct, paternalistic rule, the British Raj had failed to provide the necessary resources for the development of those institutions that were essential to the needs of the people of Midnapur. Therefore, having to start almost from scratch and with limited resources, Congressmen in the District Board were faced with the uphill task of attempting to provide a minimum of basic amenities for the people of the district. This they did, perhaps not in the most efficient manner and not without some corrupt practices; but it was on the basis of those limited measures that they managed to acquire some credibility for themselves.

But the extent to which the Congress record in the District Board helped to build up a political base must not be exaggerated. If political success depended on the ability to build more schools, hospitals, dispensaries and water-works, then Congress did achieve very little. In 1930, Midnapur was still lacking and continues to

89. Ibid, p.23.
90. Figures compiled from Midnapore District Gazetteer, B. Volumes 1900-1 to 1910-11 and 1920-21 to 1930-31.

TABLE 6:2

Local Rates Levied by the District Board 1921-22 to 1929-30

1921 - 22	457,845
1922 - 23	523,391
1923 - 24	640,641
1924 - 25	686,260
1925 - 26	644,221
1926 - 27	627,867
1927 - 28	654,359
1928 - 29	665,066
1929 - 30	628,689

(Source: Bengal District Gazatteers, B Volume, Midnapore Statistics 1921-22 to 1930-31)

lack, those civic and service facilities that characterise a modern society. Had Congress pinned its hopes of political success on creating these, it would have raised false expectations among the people and would consequently have fallen victim to an inevitable political backlash based on the frustration of rising expectations. Congress used its control of the District Board to cater to some very basic and elementary needs of the people, but above all, it used the Board to provide the necessary atmosphere conducive to the spread of nationalist politics. This meant essentially freedom from some petty bureaucratic constraints, and preventing the emergence of a rival political force capable of challenging its hegemony. In a rural society where social status and power emanated from the control of the land, political success or failure depended on a party's politics and strategies on the crucial land question.

Congress and the Land Question

The emergence of Gandhi as the leader of the Indian National Congress coincided with the entry of the middle classes and the peasantry into the nationalist movement. Describing the 1920 Special session of the Congress in Calcutta, Nehru wrote: "A new class of delegate drawn from the lower middle classes, became the type of Congressman... Now the peasants rolled in, and in its new garb Congress began to assume the look of a vast agrarian organisation"[91] The non-cooperation movement saw the massive participation of middle and poor peasants in various parts of the country.[92] In Bengal, with the merging of the Khilafat and the Congress movements, poor Muslim peasants in East Bengal played some part in the non-cooperation to the extent that some Hindu political commentators warned of an impending 'social revolution'[93] However, with the end of the movement in 1922 and the adoption of the Council-entry programme by C.R.Das, Congress abandoned systematic work among these underprivileged participants and concentrated its energies in securing a majority within the Council to thwart the progress of Dyarchy. In an obvious attempt to woo the zamindars and members of

91. Quoted in Jairus Banaji ' The Comintern and Indian Nationalism' International, III, 4, 1977, p.27.
92. Gyanendra Pandey, The Ascendancy of the Congress in Utter Pradesh 1926-34, OUP 1978, Ch. 3 and 7.
93. See J. H. Broomfield, op.cit. p.225.

of the Nationalist grouping in Bengal, the Swaraj Party manifesto of 1923 stated:

> True it is that the Party stands for justice to the tenant but poor indeed will be the quality of that justice if it involves any injustice to the landlord. The party believes that it is only by serving the true interests of both that it can find a solid base for Swarajya...[94]

After certain zamindar Council members had co-operated with the Swaraj Party to defeat government motions on Ministers' salaries, the Swarajist leadership went out of its way to involve more and more zamindars into the organisation. An article in Forward summed up the current thinking:

> Their independence and courage have been phenomenal and the country owes them a deep debt of gratitude that they have made such a bold stand in spite of the known difficulties and delicacy of their position. Their sympathy for the poor of the province, their efforts to ameliorate the hopeless condition of the masses augurs well for the improvement of the village, and directly contradicts the mischievous lie that the nationalist movement is a middle class movement for the purpose of safeguarding middle class rights...By associating with the progressive movement they have proved themselves natural leaders of the people and have shown conclusively that the Zamindars are determined to occupy their proper place in the province. All honour and glory to them.[95]

In pursuance of this policy of attracting zamindars to the nationalist cause, the Swaraj Party supported the candidature of Raja Pramathanath Roy of Dighapatia, Priyanath Roy of Bhagyakul, the Raja of Natore and Devendralal Khan of Narajole in the 1926 elections.[96] Moreover, Tulshi

94. Quoted in Gyanendra Pandey, 'A Rural Base for Congress: The United Provinces 1920-1940' in D. A. Low (ed), Congress and the Raj, London 1977, p.213.
95. Whip, 'Bengal Council: Its Work', Forward 13th April 1924.
96. Santosh Papers, Clippings (NMML) and Forward 1st December 1925.

Charan Goswami, a major zamindar became a leading member of the inner coterie of the Swaraj Party. In fact, one Congress member claimed that about three-fourths of the Swaraj Party members in the Legislative Council were zamindars.[97]

There were three basic reasons for the Swaraj Party's overwhelming dependence on zamindars. Firstly, it arose from the Congress leadership's particular understanding of the national movement as an all-class alliance against British imperialism. Nehru expressed this most succinctly: "Our activity should be such as to appeal or inspire the largest number or classes of our countrymen..."[98] For the Bengal Congress, Kumar Shankar Roy expressed this tendency by appealing to zamindars to make some minor concessions to the tenants.

> This will not only earn their goodwill but will give you good value for your holdings and thereby giving (sic) you greater yields in the shape of higher rents and premiums. It will then only be possible for you to act as their leaders.[99]

Secondly, there was the fact of the real weakness of the national bourgeoisie in Bengal. Unlike Bombay, where the control of the cotton textile industries was vested in the hands of an Indian capitalist class sympathetic to the aspirations of Indian nationalism, there was no corresponding pattern of indigenous entrepreneurship in Calcutta. In 1914, 81.26% of total European rupee investment in India was concentrated in Calcutta and at the end of the period in 1947 this proportion was still 72.28%.[100] This meant that the financial support for Congress available to the organisation from the national bourgeoisie was severely limited. As a result, the leadership of the Bengal Congress had to look to 'patriotic' zamindars to support the Congress financially. The rise in the Congress organisation of a zamindar like Devendralal Khan of Narajole was in no small measure the result of his ability to contribute generously.[101] Lastly, the rapid increase in communalism following the

97. Article by Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, Nihar, 13th September 1928.
98. Quoted in Pandey, 'A Rural Base for Congress',p.214.
99. Kumar Shankar Roy, 'An Appeal' Forward, 28th December 1924.
100. Rajat K. Ray Industrialisation in India: Growth and Conflict in the Private Corporate Sector 1914-47, OUP 1979 p.51.
101. Interview with Mrs. Anjali Khan.

riots of 1926 and the breakdown of the Bengal Pact led to a shift away from nascent class politics in Bengal. Since electoral battles preoccupied the Bengal Congress in the 1920's and communalism had infected the entire political climate of the province, Hindus as a body were almost bound to vote for any Congress candidate nominated by the leadership. This led to a disproportionate increase in the influence of zamindar Congressmen, while at the same time further alienating the Muslims, especially in East Bengal. In fact, concessions to tenants and reducing the powers of the zamindars were equated with a fear of the political rise of the Muslims, more so since the greatest advocates of tenancy legislation were invariably the Muslim politicians.[102] This would also explain why in 1938, almost all the Congress and Hindu Legislators opposed the Education Cess on zamindars imposed by the Fazlul Huq ministry. All these factors together contributed towards a situation whereby Congress in Bengal became, to use a phrase of John Gallagher 'so radical in style, so conservative in practice'[103]

On the 7th July 1921, the Bengal Legislative Council passed a resolution recommending the appointment of a Committee to consider and report on the amendments needed in the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. The Committee presented its report along with a preliminary draft of a Bill, in December 1922. The draft was circulated and modified, and a Bill was introduced in the Legislative Council on 3rd December 1925. The Council then referred the Bill to a Select Committee of 18 members. The Select Committee submitted its report which suggested certain alterations to the draft bill. But the members of the Select Committee were far from unanimous in their views, and 13 members wrote notes of dissent. The government was therefore unable to accept the views of the Select Committee and so referred the matter to an informal sub-committee. The advice given by this body was accepted by the government with minor modifications and was presented as a Bill to the Council and became the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1928.[104]

Thus, from the end of 1922 till the Bill became law in 1929, Bengal

102. Article by Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, Nihar, 13th September 1928.
103. John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930-39' in Gallagher, Johnson and Seal (ed), op.cit, p.324
104. The Bengal Tenancy Act (Act VIII of 1885) as Modified up to the 22nd February 1929, Annotated by Sir P.C.Mitter and Manmatha Nath Mukherji, Calcutta 1929, p.XXV.

witnessed a continuous debate at all levels on the question of land reforms. The examination of this debate in Midnapur, and the political initiatives arising from it enable us to get some picture of the political orientation of the local Congress.

One of the main recommendations of the Committee formed in 1921 and headed by Sir John Kerr, was a proposal to give occupancy rights to a certain class of bargadars.[105] This was a radical proposal as it sought to eliminate the various layers of tenant intermediaries who were not actually involved in the actual cultivation of the land. In practical terms, this proposal, if implemented, would have resulted in the erosion of powers of the jotedars as well as large sections of cultivating tenure-holders who let out some section of their holdings to bargadars. The peculiarities of the pattern of landholding in Midnapur were such that bargadars comprised a small minority of the peasant population. According to the 1931 Census, only 30,158 males and 1881 females earned their principal livelihood by cultivating as tenants without security of tenure; this was opposed to 357,143 people whose principal livelihood came from their position as cultivators with tenure.[106] This numerical weakness, coupled with the fact that the bargadars did not have the franchise, meant that they could not find any political backing for their cause, at least not in Midnapur. Neither did they possess any independent organisations of their own representing their interests. Thus it was hardly surprising that the Kerr Committee's proposal could not muster any support in the district.

The news of the Kerr Committee's recommendations created a minor panic in Midnapur. Apprehensive of the fact that government might grant security of tenure to the bargadars, many ryots and jotedars refused to hand over their plots for cultivation.[107] The tenure-holders made common cause with the zamindars against the government. At a meeting in Tamluk, presided over by Raja Surendranath Roy of Tamluk, and attended by 800 people, a resolution was passed: "Having heard that the present Tenancy Act will be changed, this meeting protests on the ground that the changes will be of a

105. Report of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission, 1940, Vol 1, p.29.
106. Census of India, 1931, Vol V, Part II, pp. 82-3, These figures do not include the number of dependents.
107. Letter from Ashutosh Jana, Nihar, 10th April 1923.

revolutionary character."[108] A note from the 'Inhabitants of Midnapur' was sent to the government opposing the government's moves.[109] Rai Manmatha Nath Bose Bahadur, Government Pleader, Rajendra Chandra Sengupta, Munsif in Ghatal, and Atul Chandra De, Pleader, gave evidence to the government that "under-ryots should not be given the status of an occupancy ryot. This may be left to custom and usage"[110] A petition against the measure was circulated in Contai subdivision and was signed by at least 153,100 people.[111] Ashutosh Jana, a veteran tenant activist, summed up the basic sentiments of the opposition: "No one is willing to recognise bhagchasis or bargadars as tenants. They are mere agricultural labourers"[112]

In the face of such overwhelming pressure from 'loyalist' supporters,[113] zamindars, Congressmen and tenants, the goverment was compelled to abandon its schemes for the extension of occupancy rights to bargadars.[114] However, it should be borne in mind that although the ryots and the jotedars made common cause with the zamindars to oppose this particular aspect of the Bill, a distinction was always made of the separate interests of the two groups, i.e. between tenants and landlords. Nihar, which at that point in time was an uncritical supporter of the Midnapur Congress and Sasmal, while urging tenants to oppose rights for bargadars, also urged them to unite against the zamindars. It suggested that tenants link up with the struggle against zamindari harassment in other parts of the district and take up membership of the Bengal Krishak and Raiyat Sabha.[115] In opposing the government, the Congress in Midnapur was always careful not to advocate retention of the status quo, but to argue for the extension of the rights of the entire body of tenants. This latter aspect of its programme was to be of crucial importance in the next stage of the Tenancy Bill.

In formulating the new Tenancy Act, the government had to play a delicate game. On one hand, they had to protect some of the interests of the zamindars, who as a class, had remained loyal to the government;

108. Nihar, 1st May 1923.
109. GOB Legislative Dept., Collection of Opinions on the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill, 1925, pp. 184-5.
110. Ibid, pp. 12,21.
111. Nihar, 8th May 1923.
112. Ibid, 17th April 1923.
113. Ashutosh Jana, for example, claimed that the new Bill would destroy those who have been supporters of the Government. Ibid 17th April 1923.
114. Bengal Land Revenue Commission 1940, Vol 1, p.29.
115. Nihar, 10th April 1923.

on the other hand, they had to retain the loyalty of the Muslim bloc in the Legislative Council so as to thwart the disruptionist tactics of the Swaraj Party, and this meant extension of rights to the ryots and a section of the under-ryots. The government could not hope to satisfy any of the competing interests fully, and therefore had to formulate the changes in such a way as not to antagonise any section. The final draft of the Bill, which was to become the new Tenancy Act, expressed this exercise in tight-rope walking.

While not recognising the rights of bargadars and bhagchasis, the Bill gave occupancy rights to that section of the under-ryots who paid fixed cash rents, or delivered a fixed quantity of produce irrespective of the actual gross produce, or who had a homestead on their lands, or had occupied it for 12 years continuously and had been admitted in a document by their landlords to have a permanent and heritable right. These sections of under-tenants were also granted some protection from arbitrary rent-increases. As with the under-ryots, the extension of the rights of occupancy ryots too was subject to many qualifications. Their holdings were declared to be transferable and heritable, but the zamindars were entitled to a transfer selami amounting to 20% of the sale price or five times the rent. Moreover, the zamindars were given the right of pre-emption on payment of the sale price plus 10% as compensation to the purchaser. The occupancy ryots were also given full rights on all trees on their holdings, the right to pay rent either at the zamindars village office (i.e. not at the kutchery or by postal money order, and they were given full rights to excavate tanks and build pucca houses without the payment of any selami.[116]

The provisions of the new Tenancy Legislation were looked upon differently by the various classes involved. The zamindars looked upon them as a considerable, if not total, erosion of their powers. Raja P. C. Tagore, a leading zamindar in East Bengal observed to fellow-zamindar B. P. Singh Roy:

> ...the Zamindars are looked upon as 'bankers': but without any inlets to their coffers, provided with only an outlet,

116. The Bengal Tenancy Act, pp. XXXV-XXXVII and Bengal Land Revenue Commission, Vol 1, pp. 25-30.

> they will be bankrupt in no time...I should venture to think that your venerated ancestors would have thought twice before taking Putnees from the Burdwan Raj if they had known there was no permanency in Lord Cornwallis' Settlement.[117]

Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, a leading industrialist and a prominent member of the Congress also agreed that the Act "was in every sense a revolutionary measure" which had reduced zamindars "to a merely rent-receiving position with no powers of ejectment of tenants, enhancement of rents, etc, which he enjoyed before"[118] Representing the tenants' point of view, Khan Bahadur Azizul Huque welcomed the Act for the very reasons espoused by Sarkar, but in various parts of Bengal including Midnapur, tenants shared the views of Jitendralal Bannerjee who called it a 'Landlords Protection Bill'.[119]

The cause of tenants dissatisfaction related to the concessions given to the zamindars in the 20% selami (originally fixed at 25%, but later reduced) and the pre-emption clauses. In many regions, the institutionalisation of the selami at a 20% rate from an arbitrary abwab was a great boon to the tenants, but in the Contai Khas Mahal regions where the tradition of selami had not existed, this was viewed with disfavour. The pre-emption clause too, aroused fear that the zamindars would use this to convert all good lands into khas. In fact Nihar believed that so much power had been given to the zamindars that tenants would be crippled, leading to the development of class-consciousness and consequent 'Bolshevism'.[120]

Whether or not these fears were genuine or merely a part of a polemical exaggeration, the Congress organisation in Midnapur did organise politically against the anti-tenant clauses of the Bill. Initially, as with the clauses relating to bargadar rights, the Congress attempted to

117. P.C. Tagore to B. P. Singh Roy, 26th October 1938. B. P. Singh Roy Papers. 1 (NMML).
118. N. R. Sarkar, Land Reform. Its Means and Ends, Calcutta 1952, p.4. N.R.Sarkar 14, (NMML).
119. BLC Progs, XXX,1, 7th August 1928, pp. 380-476.
120. Nihar, 13th September 1928.

build up an united front with the zamindar lobby based on general opposition to government initiative. In January 1926, the three MLC's from Midnapur - Devendralal Khan, Mahendra Nath Maity and Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, organised a committee to coordinate opposition to the Bill. The committee included members of the pro-tenant lobby like B. N. Sasmal and Sarat Chandra Jana, but also included 'loyalist' Rai Manmatha Nath Bose Bahadur and other pro-zamindar members like Upendra Nath Maity.[121] Because of the eclectic composition of the membership, and given the specific nature of the government proposals, the Committee failed to get off the ground. In fact opinion in Midnapur was sharply polarised between the zamindar lobby and the tenant lobby. For the zamindar lobby, Ramani Mohan Maity, at a public meeting at Egra, raised fears that the provisions relating to the sale of land, possession of trees and excavating tanks would lead to friction and confrontation between zamindar and tenants.[122] Devendralal Khan, the MLC, who was also the zamindar of Narajole, based his opposition on more selfish reasons; he was afraid of losing many lakhs of rupees from tenants getting possession of the Sâl trees in his zamindari.[123]

However, the majority of the Congress activists and the local paper, Nihar, espoused the cause of the tenants. In Southern Midnapur, particularly in the Contai Khas Mahals and the Mahisadal Raj, Congress members like Adita Kumar Bankura helped to initiate and organise Krishak Samity's and mobilised tenants against zamindari harassment.[124] These organisations now formed the backbone of the Midnapur Congress' opposition to the particular proposals of the Bill. Within the Legislative Council, Mahendra Nath Maity and Pramatha Nath Bannerjee made common cause with the 'Praja' bloc and members such as Jitendralal Banerji; Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, for example, proposed an amendment calling for the reduction of the zamindar's selami from 25% to 12% 'where it was the custom to pay'.[125] After the Bill was passed in the Council, B. N. Sasmal came out from his

121. Ibid, 2nd February 1926.
122. Ibid, 2nd February 1926.
123. Article by Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, Ibid, 2nd October 1928.
124. Ibid, 24th June 1924, 14th May 1929 and 14th August 1928.
125. Ibid, 13th September 1928.

Calcutta seclusion to speak at various public meetings against the selami and pre-emption clauses,[126] and Congress member Surendra Nath Das openly called upon the Midnapur MLC's to break with the official Congress whip.[127] So intense was the tenant resentment, that Nihar expressed the hope that Sasmal would come out of his retirement and lead a movement of tenants on the scale of the 1921 Union Board agitation.[128] Things were indeed hotting up in Midnapur, when the Karachi Congress and Gandhi's Dandi march swept the country and led Midnapur into the Civil Disobedience movement in 1930.

The stand taken by the Midnapur Congress did not make the organisation very popular with the Congress leaders in Calcutta. Because of the particular understanding of the nature of the anti-imperialist struggle and the preponderance of zamindars in the Swarajist group in the Council, the BPCC did not make common cause with the struggle of the tenants. Forward offered a justification of the Congress standpoint:

> The Congress Party, we repeat, stands by the principle enunciated by Deshbandhu and will do everything in its power to secure justice and fair treatment for the tenants. But justice to the tenants should not involve injustice to another class of the people who come within the category of landlords. The one supreme test which the Congress Party will apply in judging the merits of the Tenancy Bill will be how far its provisions will help to extend the rights of the people and will improve their economic and social condition without doing palpable injustice to the landlords ...The Congress Party stand for a just and equitable adjustment of conflicting interests for that alone will lead to that solidarity among the people so essential for the growth of nationalism.[129]

Not mentioned in the editorial was the important fact that the Congress Party had received Rs 38,000 from the Bengal Zamindar Sabha and Rs 15,000

126. Ibid, 2nd July 1929.
127. Ibid, 3rd December 1929.
128. Ibid, 12th November 1929.
129. Forward, 9th August 1928.

from Shasi Kanta Acharya, the Raja of Mymensingh, to campaign against the Tenancy Bill.[130] As a result of these factors, Congress not only supported the pre-emption and 20% selami clauses, but also argued against the tenants' right to trees on their holdings and the right to excavate tanks at will. On the question of pre-emption, Congress argued that this was a necessary safeguard to prevent the land from passing into the hands of mahajans and Englishmen; excavating tanks on the other hand, would make the countryside unhealthy.[131] When Pramatha Nath Bannerjee argued against the Congress stand, Dr. B. C. Roy informed him that he should either accept the Congress decision or quit and seek re-election as a 'Praja' representative.[132] It was therefore with some justification that the British officials, keen to maintain the rigid Hindu-Muslim demarcation, could point to the Bengal Congress as the bastion of privilege acting against the interests of the 'peasantry'.[133] It should also come as no surprise to note that besides the Midnapur MLC's, Jitendralal Bannerji and the trade union leader Prabhavati Dasgupta, the main opposition to the Congress position on the Tenancy Bill came from Muslim members such as Maulvi Asimuddin, Maulvi Jalaluddin and Maulvi Nurul Huq.[134]

The ability of the bulk of the Midnapur Congress to distance itself from the official Congress on the land reform issue, was to be a crucial element for the growth of the party in the district. Unlike other districts, of Bengal, notably East Bengal, where Congress articulated the interests of zamindars and the bhadrolok middle classes, the local organisation in Midnapur emerged as a champion of the interest of all tenants i.e. both ryots and the jotedars. By actually understanding the intricacies of the landholding pattern and its subsequent translation into electoral arithmetic, Congress was successful in retaining and extending its political base in the area. Because of the absence of the communal issue in the district, the Congress was able to rope in the political dynamism of tenant-cultivators and the intermediate jotedars and therefore capitalise on the traditions of past tenant struggles and

130. Hijli Hitaishi, 2nd January 1930 and Bimalananda Sasmal,'Bharat ki Kore Swadhin Holo', Desh, 22nd August 1978.
131. Article by Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, Nihar, 25th September and 2nd October 1928.
132. Ibid, 13th September 1928.
133. Broomfield, op.cit, pp.285-88.
134. Forward, 19th August 1928.

the Mahishya caste movement which had seen the growth of a spirit of 'peasant-pride' among members of that caste.[135] The reason for the growth of Congress in Midnapur is to be found not through a study of patronage networks, or abstract nationalist ideology, but in their ability to articulate the class interests of that propertied section of the rural population who made up the bulk of the voting population under the provisions of the 1919 Government of India Act. The Indian Nationalist movement, was sustained and led to victory in its Gandhian phase, by a constituency that was created not by the subjective desires of its financiers and idealogues, but by the British Raj. It was from these propertied sections that Congress got its dynamism and momentum, and also its inherent limitations.

Midnapur Congress & Calcutta

The picture this example has given of the support base of the Midnapur Congress in contrast with the BPCC's failure to articulate the interests of intermediate tenants implies an estrangement between the PCC and the bulk of the Midnapur Congress organisation. Indeed, Pramatha Nath Bannerjee, a Midnapur MLC, warned his district organisation that they could not hope to get their voices heard unless they elected people who could represent the aspirations of their constituents honestly.[136] As a result, during the 1929 elections, the Midnapur DCC refused to accept Devendralal Khan of Narajole, the sitting MLC, as their candidate. This decision caused a great commotion in the BPCC offices in Calcutta, as Devendralal was intimately linked with all the leading figures of the Bengal Congress. Dr. B. C. Roy and Subhas Bose had to come down personally to Midnapur, reconvene a DCC meeting, and use all their persuasion and coercion to get Devendralal renominated.[137]

But this conflict between the district and Calcutta was not an isolated incident. Relations between the Midnapur Congress and the BPCC had not been cordial since 1923. However, the disagreements which were to reach their culmination during the Civil Disobedience movement, were not based as in 1928 on ideological questions. Political issues did play a part but they were most often subordinated to sharper issues of

135. See above chapters 3 and 4.
136. Nihar 13th September 1928.
137. Ibid, 14th May 1929.

personalities, especially involving the two leading lights of the Midnapur Congress, B. N. Sasmal and Devendralal Khan.

Their rivalry was quickened by Sasmal's relations with the controlling group of the Bengal Congress after 1923. After their release from jail in 1922, C. R. Das and his followers formed the Swaraj Party and embarked on a Council-entry programme. Since the success of this strategy depended on their ability to obstruct the functioning of Dyarchy, the Swarajists considered all means necessary to achieve this end. Thus in their electoral struggle to defeat Sir Surendranath Banerji, the Party paraded a prostitute who enlightened the electorate on the supposed sexual perversions of Surendranath;[138] within the Council, in order to secure the votes of non-aligned Muslim members, huge sums of money was paid out in bribes.[139] The idealism that had marked the Congress during the non-cooperation movement was partially lost in the Swaraj Party's bid to secure immediate advantages. Even Sir P. C. Ray was moved to say in 1924, that "no self-respecting person can stay amidst the unprincipled corruption and factionalism of the Swaraj Party".[140] It was in this atmosphere that the first break between Midnapur and Calcutta took place.

At stake was the position of Chief Executive Officer of the Calcutta Corporation, where the Swarajists commanded a majority. According to Sasmal, C. R. Das had promised him this job in 1924. However, influential Congress members raised objections to the appointment of Sasmal. Firstly, they argued that Sasmal, normally residing at Contai, did not have any experience of the problems of urban administration. Secondly, many members, notably the Kayasthas, raised objections to the caste of Sasmal whom they referred to as the 'Kaibarta from Midnapur'. This lobby proposed that Subhas Bose, a Kayastha, should be given the job instead. The Kayastha lobby was backed by ex-detenus with whom Sasmal had come into conflict in 1920 on the question of the former's misuse of Congress funds. Das, in spite of his ealier promise to Sasmal, could not afford to offend the powerful 'Kayastha clique' and supported the candidature of

138. Bimalananda Sasmal, Swadhinathar Phanki, Calcutta 1374 (B.S.) p.113.
139. Satcowripati Roy, Oral History Transcript No 267, (NMML) pp. 27-9.
140. B. Sasmal, Swadhinathar Phanki, p.115.

Subhas Bose who was then elected to the post.[141] In disgust, Sasmal quit the Swaraj Party and resigned his seat in the Legislative Council. The use of the caste factor in deciding the fate of Sasmal resulted in consderable sympathy for him in Midnapur, and he was able to retain the allegience of the Congress organisation there in spite of his resignation from the Swaraj Party.

From 1924 till 1926, Sasmal devoted his energies towards running the District Board in Midnapur. C. R. Das, anxious not to lose the services of the man who had built up the Congress in Midnapur and who had got him a seat in the Legislative Council,[142] offered Sasmal the Presidency of the Bengal Provincial Conference in 1925 to compensate for his inability to support him in the Calcutta Corporation; Sasmal declined the offer.[143] However, on the death of C. R. Das in 1925, Sasmal rejoined the Swaraj Party and resumed his seat in the Legislative Council. Following the overwhelming success of the Congress in the Midnapur Local Board elections of 1925, Sasmal's popularity in the Congress reached an all-time high, and he was called upon to preside over the Krishnanagar session of the Bengal Provincial Conference in 1926.

But outside the Congress, politics in Bengal had taken an ominous turn. In 1923, C. R. Das had concluded the Bengal Pact with some leading Muslim politicians of Bengal. Under the terms of this Pact, 55% of all government posts would be reserved for Muslims and in Local and District Boards the majority and minority communities would divide seats in the ratio of 60:40. To ensure religious tolerance and communal harmony, music was to be prohibited before mosques and Muslims were to enjoy the freedom to perform korbani.[144] The Bengal Pact, which gained the Swarajists a great deal of credibility among the Muslims, was a necessary tactical ploy to thwart government moves to create a gulf between Hindus and Muslims.

In April 1926, following an attack upon an Arya Samaj procession that was allegedly playing music before a mosque, communal riots broke out in Calcutta.

141. P. Pal, op.cit, p.37 and pp. 109-13. B. Sasmal, Swadhinathar Phanki, pp. 78-9.
142. In 1923, Sasmal had been elected to the Legislative Council from both Midnapur and Diamond Harbour. He resigned his Midnapur seat and offered it to C. R. Das who was then elected.
143. Forward, 2nd December 1924, 8th February 1925.
144. Mushirul Hasan, Nationalism and Communal Politics in India 1916-1928, Delhi 1979, p.212.

For four days, the city was in the grip of an orgy of communal violence. The communal tension soon spread to the districts and was sought to be exploited by politicians and religious fanatics. At Serajgunj leaflets were issued urging jehad against Hindus; temples were desecrated in Tipperrah; mosques were attacked in Sasaram; the Hari Sabha house at Natore was burnt; and there were accusations of rape all around.[145] Nor was there any evidence to show that the violence was confined to religious extremists on both sides; Atulya Ghosh, a Congress activist in Hoogly district observed:

> ...many people became heroes overnight for committing cold blooded murders without any qualms. In Serampore, even those women from respectable homes who were under strict purdah entertained 'heroes' at their homes. It was a weird sight. It was natural for goondas to participate in these outbreaks but educated men from respectable homes did not lag behind...[146]

The communal tension affected the politics of both communities. On the Muslim side, it enabled politicians like Sir Abdur Rahim to pose as champions of the rights of the Muslim people. In the Congress camp, the ex-detenus who had formed themselves into the Karmi Sangh, started demanding the immediate repeal of the Bengal Pact. Even Gandhians like Dr. P. C. Ghosh of the Abhoy Ashram joined in the chorus:

> ...the Bengal Pact was a blunder both politically and morally. It betrayed only the weakness of the Hindus. What held good in Mr Das' time did not hold good now...Our Muslim brothers...were becoming unreasonable in their demands day to day and the Hindus were yielding to these demands. This was sheer weakness.[147]

On April 26th, the Swarajists rubbed shoulders with the Sanatanists at a meeting of the Hindus in Calcutta; the meeting also included representatives of the Marwari community led by G. D. Birla and Rai Bahadur Badridas Goenka:

145. Forward, April 17th-22nd 1926.
146. Atulya Ghosh, 'Kashta Kalpita' 47, Desh, 22nd April 1978, p.21.
147. The Mussalman, 29th April 1927.

> The whole atmosphere was vitiated with a fearful spirit of revenge, especially dangerous because of its being exhibited in a calm and deliberative meeting. The menacing attitude of the Hindu youths of Bengal, particularly the student community, who were as if out to fight the obnoxious Mussalmans was revealed...in its very ugliest form. They want no compromise ...They are resolute to present an inflexible stand in their fight with the Mussalmans. They must be allowed to pursue their aggressive policy; they would not follow the dictates of their leaders who were termed cowards, accused of dereliction of their duties...They must have their angry Kali satisfied...[148]

This bitter communal hostility did not remain confined to certain fringe groups but also affected the mainstream of the Congress. Forward, in an obvious display of partisan journalism, commented:

> If there has not been as yet any bloodshed or loss of life in the mufassil...it is because Hindus have not yet retaliated. But even a trodden worm turns round. Some idea of the unenviable plight of Hindus in East and North Bengal may be gathered from the fact that they live in villages surrounded on all sides by a preponderating Mahomedan element....In many villages...where Hindus own cultivable lands there is not a single Hindu cultivator. The Hindu jotedar will have no other alternative than to dispose of his lands at a nominal price to the Mahomedans. ...Who knows...(they) will not sooner or later secure a Fatwa that it is sacrilege to pay rents to Hindu landlords?[149]

Also involved in the communal question was the desire of the Big Five in the Congress (a group consisting of Dr. B. C. Roy, Sarat Chandra Bose, Nirmal Chandra Chunder, Tulsi Charan Goswami and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar) to remove J. M. Sengupta from his position as Secretary to the BPCC. This they hoped to do by securing the repeal of the Bengal Pact at Krishnanagar.[150]

148. Ibid, 29th April 1926.
149. Forward, 22nd May 1926.
150. Ibid, 18th May 1926.

Though Sasmal was not a member of either contending group, he, as President of the Conference, became embroiled in the faction struggle. At the meeting of the Subjects Committee, J. M. Sengupta, proposed that due to inflamed passions and the absence of a proper atmosphere, the Bengal Pact should not be discussed at Krishnanagar. This was opposed by both the Big Five and the Karmi Sangh, and Sengupta's proposal was carried only on the casting vote of the President.[151] Sasmal thereby incurred the wrath of the entire Karmi Sangh lobby.

The success of Sengupta's motion in the Subjects Committee left the Karmi Sangh without a cause. Since they could not hope to influence any decision on the Bengal Pact, they adopted a disruptionist strategy. First they insisted on Sasmal deleting that part of his speech which contained a bitter attack on the tactics of the terrorists (see Appendix 1). Sasmal refused initially, but was persuaded by Sengupta and Sarojini Naidu to delete the objectionable section. Not satisfied, the Karmi Sangh seized upon a section of his speech which put forward the suggestion that:

> Those who believe in immediate resort to violence should cut off all connection with the Executive Committee of the Congress. And those who for some reason of other have become marked men should also keep away from these centres of work.[152]

This was deliberately interpreted as casting "malicious aspersions upon the political sufferers of the country" including Subhas Bose and others who had been detained under the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act.[153] The Karmi Sangh vocalist, Amarendra Nath Chatterjee, raised a huge outcry and demanded that Sasmal withdraw his remarks and tender an apology. This Sasmal refused to do. Sensing the mood of the Conference, Sengupta joined hands with the Karmi Sangh to introduce a resolution 'disassociating' themselves from and 'deprecating' the remarks made by Sasmal. This was passed overwhelmingly by the Conference whereupon Sasmal resigned and the Conference broke up in chaos.[154]

Sasmal was subsequently blamed for the Krishnanagar fiasco. There is little doubt that Sasmal's blunt but honest presentation of his own

151. Ibid, 23rd May 1926.
152. Ibid, 23rd May 1926.
153. Ibid, 2nd November 1926.
154. GOI H. Poll 172/1926 (NAI).

contentious views exacerbated the already tense atmosphere of Krishnanagar. But Sasmal or no Sasmal, the Krishnanagar session was bound to be a stormy affair. The strong-arm tactics of the Karmi Sangh, egged on by the Big Five, were responsible for this state of affairs. Sasmal, irrelevant as he was in the actual dispute, was made a convenient scapegoat by both parties. Yet, Sasmal was the centre of an emotive controversy covering two themes central to Bengali politics, terrorism and communalism. Since there was little in Sasmal's day-to-day conduct of politics that would merit discredit, the entire attack assumed ideolbgical overtones. The tremors of Krishnanagar were to be felt in the heart of Midnapur.

The Krishnanagar session left the Bengal Congress a divided house. The controversy over the Bengal Pact had effectively split the Congress into even halves, with the 'no changers' supporting Sengupta, and the 'pro-changers' supporting the Karmi Sangh and the Big Five. On 13th June, 1926, Sengupta convened a meeting of the BPCC where he openly accused some members of the Executive Council of subverting the unity of the Congress and actively working against the Bengal Pact. He therefore urged the BPCC to elect another Executive Committee which would cooperate with him. This was interpreted by the Karmi Sangh as a deliberate move against 'revolutionaries' in the Congress, and they walked out in protest after Sengupta's motion was carried.[155]

The month of June witnessed a flurry of accusations and counter-accusations. Sengupta publicly accused the Finance Committee of the Deshbandhu village Reconstruction Fund of refusing to cooperate with the BPCC; he accused Forward of "a breach of faith with the Congress and the Swaraj Party". The Big Five in their turn demanded the immediate repeal of the Bengal Pact, as the communal riots had transformed it into a dead letter.[156] The Karmi Sangh Manifesto went to the extent of saying that in the forthcoming elections they would not support any pro-Pact Congressman, as in their view the Pact was 'anti-national'.[157]

155. Indian Quarterly Register, January-June 1926, p.85.
156. Forward, 25th June 1926.
157. Ibid, 3rd July 1926.

However, the forthcoming elections, the pressure from the central leadership and the monsoon rains cooled tempers down.[158] Sengupta made a joint statement with Tulsi Charan Goswami urging unity of the Congress forces and an amicable resolution of differences. On 25th July, the BPCC met to elect 30 new members to the Executive Committee as the Congress Working Committee had asserted that it would not stand for Sengupta's dictatorial methods and urged him to incorporate more 'dissidents' into the Executive Committee.[159] A common list was agreed upon by Sengupta and the Big Five and included prominent members of the Karmi Sangh like Amarendra Nath Chatterjee and Upendra Nath Bannerjee.[160] In order to make organisational elections 'impartial', the Executive Committee authorised a change of Congress returning officers, and in Midnapur, Sasmal was replaced by ex-detenu Jyotish Chandra Ghosh. Both the inclusion of the Karmi Sangh members and the change in Midnapur were seen by Sasmal as a slap in the face, and he along with a dozen supporters resigned from the Executive Committee in protest.

Though Sasmal could not carry any political heavy-weights with him, his resignation was the signal for many Muslims to sever their ties with the Congress. In a resignation letter, Maulvi Mujibur Rehman, Abdul Matin Chowdhury and Ashrafuddin Ahmad Chowdhury told the BPCC:

> As we have already said, it is painful for us to sever connection with the Congress...We, however, hope to return to it when it again becomes truly national and when the Mussalmans by their own exertions have sufficiently strenghtened themselves so that the Hindus may meet them on equal terms.[161]

Moreover, many Muslims withdrew their names as Congress candidates. On their part, the joint forces of Sengupta, the Karmi Sangh and the Big Five launched a campaign of vilification against Sasmal. It was alleged that Sasmal was actually conspiring to oust Sengupta as President of the BPCC, and had been attempting to solicit Karmi Sangh support for his

158. Note by Motilal Nehru, 4th July 1926, AICC G57 (II)/1926.
159. Ibid.
160. Indian Quarterly Register, July-December 1926, p.41.
161. Mussalman, 4th September 1926.

venture.[162] It was further alleged that he had divulged Congress secrets to the Statesman newspaper.[163] "Mr. Sasmal", remarked Forward sneeringly, "will some day learn that it is neither prudent nor patriotic to allow personal considerations to run away with one's judgement"[164]

The conflicts in the BPCC and the ultimate resignation of Sasmal were to have profound effects on the politics of Midnapur district. Within weeks of Sasmal's resignation, the BPCC began the task of selecting candidates for the coming elections to the Bengal Legislative Council. The Midnapur DCC had informed the BPCC of their decision to sponsor the candidatures of Sasmal, Pramatha Nath Bannerjee and Mahendra Nath Maity for the three Midnapur seats. They were unwilling to extend support to Devendralal Khan, considering the latter's acceptance of the post of nominated District Board Chairman. But the BPCC was in no mood to support Sasmal's candidature considering the stance he had taken in the recent factional squabbles of the Bengal Congress. Nor was Devendralal Khan unwilling to accept Congress nomination, especially as it granted him some sort of legitimacy for his recent actions. Moreover, Devendralal had in the past donated generously to the Congress coffers, and Dr. B. C. Roy, one of the Big Five, also happened to be his personal physician. These factors weighed heavily in favour of Devendralal, and for the moment his past conduct was forgotten as the BPCC strove to eliminate Sasmal from his rural base. In late September, after Sasmal rejected the BPCC offer to contest one of the South Midnapur seats, and leave the north to Devendralal, the latter was officially selected as the Congress candidate. On 25th September 1926, the Midnapur DCC met in an emergency session and expressed dissatisfaction at Khan's nomination.[165] Sasmal on his part, brought the entire issue before Motilal Nehru, the Congress President, who refused to intervene in provincial disputes and in fact confirmed Devendralal's nomination.[166] Moreover, Pramatha Nath Bannerjee and Mahendra Nath Maity refused to stand as BPCC candidates if Sasmal was refused a ticket. As a result, the BPCC set up Gangadhar Nanda and Rebati

162. Forward, 3rd September 1926.
163. Ibid, 4th September 1926.
164. Forward, 1st September 1926.
165. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 3rd October 1926.
166. AICC G57 (V)/1926.

Nath Maity as candidates for the two southern seats. This was in spite of the fact that the two had a long record of opposition to the Congress.

After the BPCC's final announcement, the three 'rebel' candidates could not stake their claim on the 'Congress' label. At an election meeting, Basanta Kumar Mazumdar, who had quit the BPCC with Sasmal, announced that the fight was between Mr. Sasmal's party and the Congress.[167] Indeed, both Pramatha Nath Bannerjee and Mahendra Nath Maity did not care to hide the fact of their personal allegience to Sasmal. But so strong was the influence of Sasmal, Bannerjee and Maity over the local Congress organisation that the bulk of the Congress activists in the district supported them rather than the 'official' Congress candidates. In the South Midnapur constituencies, especially Contai, there was the rather ironic spectacle of the former opposition members around Hijli Hitaishi giving their full support to the 'Congress' candidates. Even the Sub-Registrar and the Sub-Inspector of Police extended their support.[169] Devendralal Khan was not however similarly handicapped. Not only did he manage to secure the services of senior Congress leaders like Dr. B. C. Roy and Tulsi Goswami to campaign for him, but he also managed to wrest control of the Ghatal Subdivision Congress Committee, though the senior leaders like Mohini Mohan Das were campaigning for Sasmal.[170] Moreover, he managed to secure the full services of Upendra Nath Maity, whose base in the Midnapur town municipality Sasmal had not been able to break, and of Pandit Mokshada Charan Sannyadhai, a prominent religious figure of Midnapur who had campaigned for Congress in the Local Board elections of 1926. But on balance, the 'official' Congress candidates were more dependent on support from individuals outside Congress while the local Congress remained faithful to its district leadership.

But the objective ideological climate was against Sasmal; like the rest of Bengal, Midnapur in 1926, was gripped by the growing Hindu-Muslim tension and the resulting communal outbreaks. Following the news of the Calcutta disturbances, the Hindu Sabha in Kharagpur stepped up

167. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 31st October 1926.
168. Hijli Hitaishi, 28th October; 11th November 1926.
169. Ibid, 2nd December 1926.
170. Forward, 8th October 1926.

its activities. They organised various meetings in the district where inflamatory speeches were delivered against the Muslims. In part the activities of the Hindu Sabha was directed against the Railway Workers Union which took a conscious decision to remain aloof from communal disputes.[171] But the Sabha's activities did have the desired effect of fanning the flames of communal tension. On 6th May 1926, the Shitala procession in Ghatal was held in a tense atmosphere with Hindu and Congress volunteers forming defence squads to ward off some imaginary Muslim attack.[172] On 17th May, communal riots erupted in Kharagpur on the basis of a rumour that Muslims had taken away a Hindu corpse and were cutting it up. The riots claimed 11 lives (7 Muslim and 4 Hindus) and Intelligence Reports stated clearly that the responsibility lay with the Hindu Sabha members.[173]

The communal tension in Midnapur seriously affected the political position of Sasmal. Forces opposed to Sasmal went around the district citing Sasmal's defence of the Bengal Pact and his close links with the Muslim members of Congress. A Bengali leaflet circulated in Midnapur and signed by among others, Upendra Nath Maity stated:

> Birendranath Sasmal has given shelter in his own house to those Muslims who have violated the honour of Hindu women and destroyed or defiled Hindu temples. In fact Sasmal is personally ready to embrace Islam any day.[174]

Another Bengali leaflet entitled 'Hindus Beware' was anonymously circulated which described Sasmal as a supporter of the banning of music before mosques and the 80% job reservation for Muslims, and which appealed to the Hindu voters of Ghatal not to vote for him for the sake of the Hindu religion.[175] Sasmal's Krishnanagar speech against terrorism was also cited as an argument against him. At a public meeting, the Karmi Sangh leader, Upendra Nath Bannerjee declared that Sasmal was a Police informer who had been responsible for the arrest of Subhas Bose on charges of terrorism.[176] These accusations did make a significant headway among voters in an atmosphere where emotive passions ruled supreme.

171. R. N. Reid, District Magistrate to Commissioner, 30th May 1926, GOI H. Poll 11 (VIII)/1926 (NAI).
172. Forward, 6th May 1926.
173. GOI H. Poll 11 (VIII)/1926 (NAI).
174. Bimalananda Sasmal, 'Bharat ki Kore Swadhim Holo', p.43.
175. Bimalananda Sasmal, Swadhinathar Phanki, pp. 138-40.
176. Ibid, p.140.

On the other hand, the communal riots enhanced the political credibility of Devendralal Khan. A major financier of the Karmi Sangh in Midnapur, Devendralal projected himself as the spokesman for the Hindus.[177] When the district authorities banned all processions with music for two months, it was Devendralal Khan who led the protest along with the Executive Committee of the Hindu Sabha.[178] In July, Devendralal went on a tour of the district to set up Hindu societies which were linked to the Hindu Sangathan movement; these organisations were also generously financed by him.[179] In short, the ideological climate generated by the communal riots in Bengal helped Devendralal to establish an alternative political network from that of the local Congress. It was this new 'Hindu network' based in the towns that was to give Devendralal his narrow victory over Sasmal in the elections. But the absence of the communal spirit in South Midnapur could not ensure similar victories for the 'official' Congress candidates there; in both Contai and Tamluk, the 'rebel' local Congress maintained their overwhelming political hegemony.

Following the 1926 elections and the BPCC disputes in early 1927, which left Sasmal in the political wilderness, relations between the BPCC leadership and the Midnapur Congress remained strained. The Midnapur Congress stayed aloof from the battles within the larger organisation, and with the exception of Devendralal Khan, had little or no influence in Calcutta. This trend was to continue even during the Civil Disobedience campaign.[180]

Conclusion

In 1920, Gandhi had referred to Congress as a 'National organisation providing a platform for all parties to appeal to the Nation'. Nehru too was to reiterate the Congress' political hetrogeneity when he wrote: "The Congress was a party in some ways; it has also been a joint platform for several parties"[181] As a movement for political freedom based on a multi-class strategy, Congress embraced within its fold disparate social elements. Thus 'radicals' like Nehru, Sahajanand Saraswati and Jayaprakash Narayan co-existed in the organisation with 'conservatives' such as

177. Forward, 23rd May 1926, 7th September 1926.
178. Forward, 25th June 1926.
179. Ibid, 15th July 1926.
180. Englishman, 17th February 1927.
181. Jairus Banaji, op.cit. p.31.

Dr. B. C. Roy, K. M. Munshi and Satyamurthi. This is not to maintain that the various social forces and political tendencies co-operated in a relationship of harmonious equality. Indeed, the national objectives of the Congress maintained the political hegemony of the national bourgeoisie through a leadership that was overwhelmingly middle class in character.[182] But what kept the radical elements within the Congress organisation was the ability of the 'conservative' section, including Gandhi, to organise mass campaigns for the realisation of national independence. It was this mass character of the movement which distinguished it from say, the Kuomintang in China. As a Comintern observer pointed out in 1931, 'the masses do not yet believe in the treachery of the Congress because they think they are the Congress'[183]

But the course of the nationalist movement did not follow a path of linear growth. While the Congress leadership, and especially Gandhi, were willing to put pressure on the colonial state through sporadic mass mobilisations thereby weakening the 'left' currents within Congress, the brakes were applied to prevent the emergence of radicalisation within the course of the struggle. Indeed, the course of the struggle corresponds to what Bipan Chandra has described as the 'pressure-compromise-pressure' strategy.[184] The period 1922 to 1930 corresponds to the 'compromise' phase of the national struggle. But it was, above all, a short-term tactical compromise and not a capitulation to the forces of imperialism. The period of Dyarchy must be analysed in terms of the tactical perspectives of the Congress.

However, the regional peculiarities of Bengal altered the nature of this short term compromise with the colonial state. As has been noted previously, the overwhelming dominance of European capital in Bengal and the consequent absence of an indigenous national bourgeoisie compelled the local Congress to look increasingly towards the parasitic landlords of Cornwallis' creation. To this was added the phenomenon of communalism which sharply polarised the province along religious lines and reinforced the regional class imbalances of the Bengal Congress. Whereas, in other parts of India

182. Ibid, p.31.
183. Ibid, p.31.
184. Bipan Chandra, 'Jawaharlal Nehru and the Capitalist Class, 1936', EPW, Special Number, Agust 1975.

Congress represented the aspirations of various segments of property, in Bengal, it became the movement of Hindu property, which in East Bengal was based on semi-feudal landlordism. This factor was responsible for transforming the Bengal Congress into a conservative political force devoted to thwarting the 'social engineering' of the British and Muslim representatives. It was to produce a situation whereby Congress became an isolated minority force whose occasional burst of pseudo-radicalism, best represented by the terrorist groups, signified political desperation rather than dynamism. For the Bengal Congress, the 1920s were characterised not by mere organisational decline, but by political degeneration.

The absence of large zamindars and any significant Muslim population in Midnapur ensured the development of the local Congress along different lines. In Midnapur, the Congress sought out and created a constituency based not on religion, but on the class interests of the propertied peasantry. In that sense, it was able to attract precisely that segment of the rural population which in East Bengal was to flock to the banners of the Krishak Proja Party and the Muslim League. It was because of these factors that Midnapur, almost alone in the whole of Bengal, was able to pursue the national Congress strategy and mount an effective challenge to the colonial state during the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-34.

TABLE 6:3

Results of the 1926 Elections to the Bengal Legislative Council

MIDNAPUR NORTH	
Devendralal Khan (Congress)	6927
B. N. Sasmal (Independent)	6263
MIDNAPUR SOUTH	
Pramatha Nath Bannerjee (Independent)	3478
Gangadhar Nanda (Congress)	1785
Baranashi Banerji (Responsivist)	50
MIDNAPUR SOUTH-EAST	
Mahendra Nath Maity (Independent)	2019
Rebati Nath Maity (Congress)	21

Appendix 1

B. N. Sasmal on Terrorism

(This is the extract from Sasmal's Presidential Address to the Bengal Provincial Congress, 1926, which was expunged following a popular outcry)

Secondly, I want to show you that we cannot build pure hopes on terrorism or anarchist conspiracies. It is true that anarchism is founded on self-reliance but it is anti-moral and productive of evil results. Most of its supporters become, in the end, cowards in respect of religion, morals and character and because it must achieve its object in secret, they become used to the practice of laying and attempt to take short cuts to liberate the country by avoiding arrest. In no country has the number of anarchists been more than a handful and I am not aware it is otherwise in this country. Being numerically small they always seek short cuts which they think they discovered, many of them return to their household duties but continue to pollute society by having recourse to thefts, dacoities and other misdeeds. The disregard to certain death and the indomitable courage which are required in open warefare are qualities which cease to exist in secret methods which on the contrary engender weakness due to uncertainty of death; and the result is that those adopting secret methods soon become unfitted for citizenship in their individual capacities. The degeneration of their character is exhibited by their coming to think more of themselves than of their country but at the same time demanding from the leaders rewards for their secret and unknown sacrifices. If the leaders refuse they do not hesitate to attempt to intimidate them by sending them pistol cartridges through the post or spreading entirely false and defamatory remarks about them. Nothing better can be expected from people who take as their maxim "no means is too low", as on one hand they do not hesitate in the name of the country to commit dacoity on their own brothers, so when arrested they do not scruple to commit other dacoities on friends in order to get the funds for engaging counsel to defend them. Some of these men, it is said, do spying for government on a monthly salary. I am not surprised at such reports though others may be, for this is the inevitable fate of those who want to attain complete political independence for Bengal, or for the matter of that of India, though short cuts or who

work in the belief that such independence can be attained by means of secret conspiracies of a handful of men. Perhaps they cannot realise that if ever Swaraj is established by the efforts of a handful of such men, it will be nothing beter than a sucking and grinding machine. That all the evils and wrongs which exist in the people in general should remain as before, and a handful of Bengalis should bring Swaraj to 30 crores of men and women. Heaven save us from such a fate.

Source: GOI H. Poll 172/1926 (NAI)

THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT 1930-34

> The spirit of nationalism has existed in India for many years, but if nationalism is combined with socialism the day of freedom would be hastened. I know if we spread socialistic ideas we are bound to come into conflict with the capitalists. But this should not deter us from working for the welfare of the peasants and the workers. They are the real sons of the soil and they truly represent the Indian nation. If they are organised we will have the real sanction of the people behind us.[1]

This speech by Jawaharlal Nehru delivered at Lahore on the 8th February 1929, was fairly typical of the fiery left-wing rhetoric that abounded in the period immediately preceding the inauguration of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The appointment by the Tory government of the all-white Simon Commission to investigate the workings of the 1919 Act caused a deep convulsion in Indian politics. As hartals and demonstration against Simon became widespread, Indian politicians of all shades momentarily rallied together to protest against what was regarded as yet another racial affront.[2] The veteran Bepin Chandra Pal came out of political retirement to deliver his emotive rallying cry:

> Raise that cry, raise that cry my dear friends, here and outside. Let Bengal and India resound once more with that inspiring magic cry of Bandemataram. Let it be broadcasted from Calcutta to Lahore and from Lahore via Karachi to London.[3]

The Bengal Congress leaders issued a joint statement calling on people "not to attach even the semblance of popular sanction to its recommendations"

> ...the call of this hour is to rally all the forces of nationalism and re-establish that national determination, the potency of

1. S. Gopal, ed, Jawaharlal Nehru, Selected Works, Delhi 1973 Vol IV, p.3.
2. A notable exception was the small Communist Party which pursued the Comintern's notorious Ultra-Left strategy of the period: Jairus Banaji, 'The Comintern and Indian Nationalism' International III,4,1977.
3. Forward 17th November 1927.

which has no limits.[4]

The death of Lala Lajpat Rai following a police attack on a demonstration and detenu Jatin Das' fatal hunger strike, vitiated the atmosphere further and added to the nationalist intransigence. The supporters of 'Dominion Status' found themselves increasingly outflanked by the more militant 'Complete Independence' camp and it required the adroit manipulative powers of Gandhi to preserve the unity of the Congress.

To add to the political-constitutional crisis, India was adversely affected by the crisis of capitalism that gripped Europe in 1929. The slump in world commodity prices hit just those raw materials and items of agrarian produce on which India's export trade depended. In Bengal, the prices of raw jute and paddy fell drastically making it difficult for cultivators even to recover costs.[5] In Midnapur, the price of winter rice per maund slumped from Rs 5 - 0 in 1929-30 to Rs 3 - 8 in 1930-31.[6] Local sources told of a further fall in prices between 1932 and 1933, so much so that paddy in Contai was selling for less than Rs 1 per maund.[7] Under these circumstances, cultivators and tenants rarely had enough money surplus to provide for their own simple reproduction and meet their cash rents or revenue demands or the interest on heavy loans incurred in the past. In the districts of Bogra, Pabna and Rangpur, more than 150 estates were auctioned for default of revenue.[8] Contai too noted a flurry of auction sales in July and August 1932, after heavy rainfall had ruined the harvest.[9] A last factor was that prices of agricultural staples lagged behind those of fully or partially manufactured commodities, leading to a steep fall in living standards in the rural areas (see Table 7:1).

Nationalist opinion in India blamed the depression in India on the deflationary policies of the government and its practice of artificially keeping the exchange rate high to favour remittances to Britain rather

4. Ibid, 9th November 1927.
5. GOB Board of Revenue, Report on the Land Revenue Administration of the Presidency of Bengal 1930-31.
6. Rev-Gen XV/32/1931 (MRR).
7. Nihar, 14th March, 6th September 1932, 28th March 1933.
8. Advance, 18th September 1931, 19th June 1932.
9. Nihar, July-August 1932, Advance, 8th June 1933.

TABLE 7:1

Index of Wholesale Prices In Bengal (Base 1914 = 100)

Year	Ballam Rice No. 1	Table Rice	Cereals	Pulses	Raw Jute	All Commodities
1928	141	136	133	157	100	145
1929	114	125	125	152	95	141
1930	105	111	120	119	63	116
1931	71	92	76	89	49	96
1932	58	69	68	92	45	91
1933	57	74	66	84	41	87
1934	63	63	69	84	39	89
1935	62	77	75	85	50	91

Source: Report of the Bengal Paddy and Rice Enquiry Committee, Alipore 1940, Vol. 1, p.25.

then reinvestment in India.[10] The Indian bourgeoisie, now organised in FICCI, was especially concerned about the abnormally high rate of exchange of Rs - £ imposed by the 1926 Hilton Young Commission and wanted it to be adjusted to its 'true' exchange value of 1s 4d to the Rupee.[11] A second major grievance was the refusal of the government to implement, until 1930, the recommendations of the 1927 Textile Tariff Board for higher import duty. Even when this was implemented the Imperial Preference Clause aroused considerable opposition from Indian circles.[12] All in all, the Indian bourgeoisie, led by energetic campaigners like Birla, Thakurdas and Walchand Hirachand, and strengthened by the demoralisation in the working class movement, was in a determined mood to mount an offensive against those aspects of imperial policy which conflicted with their rising aspirations. To that end, Gandhi and the Congress organisation were important allies. As the industrialist Lalji Naranji informed the Liberal leader M. R.Jayakar, "Government indifference has driven...we capitalists to work with Socialistic organisations like Congress."[13] This was made explicit by the FICCI which in its 1930 session pledged full support to Gandhi's minimum eleven point programme.[14] In Gandhi and Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie had found a suitable vehicle for their offensive against the Raj.

The Bengal Congress

> I went out on tour to North Bengal towards the end of 1925: some of the sittings of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee which I had attended had filled me with great misgivings about the internal discipline and strength of the Congress in Bengal and I wanted to judge for myself how the organisation was working in the districts...I found an awful 'rot' in the rural centres of Congress: in many places the organisation had ceased to exist...[15]

This description by a Bengali journalist presented an accurate picture

10. Rajat K. Ray, Industrialisation in India: Growth and Conflict in the Private Corporate Sector 1914-47, Oxford 1979, pp. 247-50.
11. A. K. Bagchi, Private Investment in India 1900-39, Cambridge 1972 p.64.
12. For an account of the political behaviour of the Indian bourgeoisie during this period, see Sumit Sarkar, 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism Civil Disobedience and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (1930-31) Indian Historical Review, III, 1, 1976.
13. Sumit Sarkar, op.cit, p.123.
14. Rajat K. Ray, op.cit, p.320.
15. Nripendra Chandra Banerji, quoted in J. H. Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Phural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal, Berkeley 1968, p.268.

of the state of the Congress organisation of Bengal in the period of Council-entry. Involvement in routine parliamentary activity and the organs of local government had reduced the fighting spirit of the Congress. The organisation had been considerably weakened and members were concentrated in the towns; there were hardly any village Congress committees, no volunteer corps or branches of the Hindustan Seva Dal.[16] The influx of the terrorist wings into the Congress, their role in the communal riots of 1926 and the abandonment of the Bengal Pact had not only alienated the Muslims, but had made them definitely hostile to the Congress.

By 1929, the Congress had become the focus for career politicians keen to make a mark for themselves in the subordinate rungs of the administrative apparatus.[17] In July 1929, the Barisal Conference decided to reject the Congress Working Committee decision to boycott the Councils.[18] The more sordid aspects of this trend were visible in the affairs of the Calcutta Corporation, a rotten borough of the Congress. Here rival factions led by the Big Five and Subhas Bose on the one hand, and J. M. Sengupta on the other, squabbled amongst themselves for the share of the spoils. Radical rhetoric flowed from both sides and dishonesty in public utterances was rampant. Thus while Subhas Bose delivered emotive speeches to the youth of Bengal, the hatchet-man of his faction, Dr. B. C. Roy, was busy in Allahabad attempting to persuade Motilal Nehru to withdraw the CWC directive to hold demonstrations.[19] In the 1930 elections to the Calcutta Corporation, Dr. Roy manipulated nominations in a way so as to exclude the various DCC's, controlled by Sengupta, from the selection process.[20] The result was that two rival Congress parties fought each other only months before the Civil Disobedience Movement was inaugurated. In utter exasperation Nehru wrote:

> It has been an amazing sight. On the one hand the country ringing with preparations for civil disobedience; on the other Congressmen spending their time and energy and money

16. K. S. Roy, Secy BPCC to Secy, AICC 14th February 1929, AICC p.24/1929 (NMML). A similar organisation crisis was also noticeable in the United Provinces; cf, G. Pandey, The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh 1926-34, Oxford 1978, p.31.
17. Mussalman on 21st January 1927, claimed that Congress "Politics has been gradually veering round Bar Libraries and other centres of bourgeois influence"
18. Liberty, 16th July 1929.
19. Statement of Sir Charles Tegart, GOI H. Poll 38/1931 (NAI).
20. B.C. Roy to Nehru, 27th March 1930, AICC G120 (II)/1930 (NMML)

> in attacking each other for the purpose of gaining admittance to the Calcutta Corporation.[21]

This episode was repeated in the 1933 elections to the Calcutta Corporation; factional rivalries sprang up wherever there was some patronage to be dispensed. An example of this related to the dispensing of flood relief to the victims of the 1931 floods in West Bengal. Thus when the BPCC set up a Flood and Famine Relief Committee with Rabindranath Tagore as President, the Sengupta faction retorted by setting up the rival Sankat Tran Samity with the eminent chemist Sir P. C. Ray as President. Subhas Bose for his part accused Sir P. C. Ray of misappropriating funds in 1922 and sought Gandhi's recognition for his Committee .[23] Witnessing the absurdity, Tagore resigned from the Committee and local District Magistrates had an amusing time playing local Congress factions against each other.[24] The significant point about the rival committees was that the controversy took place at a time when Gandhi's participation in the 2nd Round Table Conference was still uncertain and there were talks about resuming civil disobedience.

The factional disputes in the Bengal Congress were not conducted discreetly behind closed doors. Both Congress factions ran English dailies with the sole aim of hurtling abuse at each other. Liberty, the mouthpiece of the Bose faction, said of Sengupta:

> If consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, and inconsistency the mark of a great soul, we must admit that Mr. J. M. Sengupta is the greatest soul living. Gifted with a wonderfully convenient memory, he forgets what he boldly declared the day before, and he has always been a puzzle to those who vainly try to reconcile his present with his past...[25]

21. 'On the conflict in Congress Circles in Bengal' by J. Nehru, 29th March 1930, AICC G120 (II)/1930 (NMML).
22. Advance, 31st March 1933.
23. Advance, 23rd August 1931 and Bose to J. Nehru, 4th September 1931, AICC p.6 (i)/1927 (NMML).
24. Advance 6th September 1931, and J. M. Sarkar, President Murshidabad DCC to Nehru, 2nd March 1931.
25. Liberty, 1st March 1930.

Advance, the paper of the Sengupta faction was no less colourful. During the 1933 Corporation elections it headlined in bold print:

> Who begged of Sir Charles Tegart for the loan of half-a-dozen European Sergeants after the Mayoral election of 1930 and appointed them in the Corporation and why? Let Dr. B. C. Roy reply.[26]

In public speeches, Sengupta hit out at what he called the 'money bags' of the Congress naming Dr. B. C. Roy, Sarat Chandra Bose and Nirmal Chandra Chunder in particular:

> I, Sengupta, am still alive. Let the BPCC office at 116 Bowbazar Street with their telephones, typewriters and chairs go to sleep. I shall go forward and I shall take the whole country with me and then in the place of this faked BPCC will establish the real BPCC for the fight that is approaching.[27]

So intense was the factionalism and so bitter the rivalries, that the last words of Sengupta before being carted away to Burma to serve a prison sentence were, 'Dissolve the EC of the BPCC'. And it did not stop at words. Meetings of the Calcutta Corporation had to be adjourned because of clashes between rival groups. The nationalist paper, Amrita Bazar Patrika, described one episode:

> Riff-raffs of society were then seen loitering in the Chamber and corridors with daggers in their possession and it seemed that the Corporation belonged to nobody. There was (sic) the supporters of Mr. Bose led by the Bengal Students Association ...There were the students belonging to the All Bengal Students Association. They were the supporters of Mr. Sengupta but in the beginning they seemed to be less vocal but presented a determined attitude. There were some Mahomedans raising war cries, some of whom were seen occupying the seats of the

26. Advance, 28th March 1933.
27. Advance, 2nd March 1930.

> Councillors. Then there were the Sikhs, the idle passers-by the Corporation employees and all sorts of people. Inside the Chamber, little boys were seen quarrelling amongst themselves as to the superior merit and demerit of Mr. Bose and Mr. Sengupta and soon they came to blows and only stopped when exhausted.[28]

It was in such an atmosphere, bordering on absurdity, that the Bengal Congress conducted its politics.

Admist this comic drama, or what Nehru described caustically as a 'Gilbert and Sullivan opera' preparations went on for the Civil Disobedience Council. Both groups contained dedicated militants who set about making preparations for the coming struggle while being at loggerheads with each other.[29] The supporters of the BPCC made strenuous efforts to recruit volunteers to the Congress. With Bose's penchant for militarism, his Bengal Volunteers led by 'Captain' J. Dutt organised parades daily at Howrah and Central Calcutta where youths wearing khaki shorts attempted to emulate cavalry men.[30] More often initiatives towards agitational politics were organised by individual Congressmen and nationalists who stood aloof from the internal power struggles.[31] But in the final analysis, the fact that civil disobedience actually got off the ground in Bengal owed a lot to the gross overreaction by the authorities. Before civil disobedience had actually been initiated, the authorities in a pre-emptive move arrested Bose, Sengupta, Bepin Behari Ganguly and Syed Jalaluddin Hashemy. On April 22nd 1930, Subhas Bose was severely beaten up at the Alipore Jail and Sengupta was put into solitary confinement.[32] The Bengal government even contemplated involving the entire Bengal Congress in a massive Conspiracy Case, along the lines of the Lahore and Meerut Conspiracy Cases.[33] In fact, the heavy handedness of the authorities led to a massive wave of anti-police sentiment and thereby added to the support

28. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 8th August 1930.
29. Hari Kumar Chakravarty, Secy DCC, to Nehru, 15th March 1930, AICC G120 (II)/1930; and Satish Chandra Dasgupta to Nehru, 3rd April 1930, AICC G86/KW(I)/1930 (AICC).
30. Liberty, 27th March 1930.
31. Thus the trade unionists Prabhavati Dasgupta and Baker Ali Mirza led 50,000 jute workers at Titagarth to a strike in a bid to involve the working class in the Civil Disobedience Movement, Liberty 20th March 1930.
32. Liberty, 23rd April 1930.
33. Irwin to Governor of Bengal, 24th April 1930, GOI H. Poll 248 (KW)/1930 (NAI).

for civil disobedience. In a note to the government, Sir B. L. Mitter, the Law member pointed out that the situation was 'calm' but 'tense':

> Below the surface, there is a widespread almost universal anti-government feeling which lends credibility to any rumour tending to discredit the government...the wrongs of the Police are magnified and made so many sources of disaffection.[34]

And Bepin Chandra Pal too observed: "I never saw during a long public life covering more than half a century, such bitter and almost universal hatred of the British as seems to have possessed every class of our people"[35]

Lastly, the inspiration provided by the heroism of the adventurous Chittagong Armoury Raid cannot be under-estimated. In a situation where the terrorist tradition was strong, even within the Bengal Congress, the exploits of Masterda (Surya Sen) and his group provided the inspiration necessary to continue the fight for all nationalists, especially those Hindus in East Bengal who were surrounded by a politically hostile population.[36] All this was in an atmosphere where the legitimacy of British rule had been questioned and rejected by the overwhelming majority of the Bengali Hindu population.

The Midnapur Congress

If the Bengal Congress was organisationally weak and torn by factional disputes, Congress in Midnapur was a model of dedication and discipline, and rooted firmly in the district. The relative geographical isolation of the district coupled with the small numbers of absentee landholders ensured that Congressmen had their interests more in the district than in Calcutta. Although Congress was the dominant party, with total control

34. Note by Sir B. L. Mitter 15th May 1930, GOI H. Poll 248 (II)/1930 (NAI).
35. F. R. March (I) 1930, GOI H. Poll 18/VI/1930.
36. The hold of terrorism as an instrument of struggle was immense on Bengali Congressmen. In the 1930 Congress Session, 193 Bengal delegates voted against Gandhi's resolution condemning the Delhi Bomb Incident; only 63 supported Gandhi. Liberty 2nd January 1930.

of the District Board, Local Boards and most Municipalities, opposition was not internalised but existed outside the Congress with strong loyalist overtones.[37] This is not of course to maintain that intra-Congress rivalries did not exist; but since the issue at stake did not concern Midnapur directly, the disputes did not affect the overall unity of the Congress in the district, except briefly in 1926. In fact after the Big Five and Sengupta successfully engineered the political humiliation of B. N. Sasmal, the Midnapur Congress preferred to remain aloof from the affairs of the Bengal Congress. The pressure from the ground against large-scale involvement in the Big Five-Sengupta fight forced even Devendralal Khan to organise a separate Midnapur Congress Relief Committee when natural inclinations would have led him to back the official Bose-led committees.[38] But absolute detachment was impossible given the important role the BPCC played in Congress affairs. When support had to be given, members of the Midnapur Congress by and large aligned themselves with the Sengupta lobby, though Devendralal Khan and Ram Sundar Singh were active supporters of Bose and the Big Five. This particular alignment seems to have been caused not so much by any particular dislike for Bose, but by the almost universal resentment of the districts towards Nalini Ranjan Sarkar and Dr B. C. Roy. It was also dictated by the large scale involvement of the ex-terrorist Karmi Sangh in the Bose faction.

This conscious policy of non-interference in the affairs of the BPCC enabled the Midnapur Congress to devote its energies to campaigning against the government rather than against a rival faction.[39] This was aided by the existence of thriving village and thana Congress Committees built up by Sasmal and his successors in the District Board. The stance taken by the majority of the Midnapur Congress on the question of the 1928 Tenancy Amendment Bill also enabled Congress to relate to the ryots and jotedars on the basis of their material interests.[40] Thus in Tamluk subdivision alone, there existed at least 16 thriving Congress Committees, and in the district as a whole there were at least 4,000 active Congress members by July 1929.[41] In

37. Only for a brief period, during the 1926 elections did the opposition merge its identity with the 'official' Congress against the 'rebels' led by Sasmal; see Chapter 6.
38. Advance, 6th September 1931.
39. F. R. June (I) 1931, GOI H. Poll 18/V/1931.
40. See chapter 6.
41. Liberty, 24th July 1929 and GOB H. Poll 335/1931 No. 12 (WBSA).

addition, for youth there existed the All Bengal Youth Association branch as well as the Midnapur District Youngmen's Association organised by Profulla Tripathi and Bhagabat Chandra Das respectively. The financial patronage extended by Devendralal Khan proved crucial in keeping these organisations going.[42] There were also individual Congressmen like Basanta Kumar Das, who operated under the auspices of the Abhoy Ashram. In remote parts of the district it was the presence of colourful characters such as Ram Sundar Singh, a notorious troublemaker, which kept a personalised Congress organisation operating in Garbetta. But for an organisation that did not depend on strictures like 'democratic centralism' it was the dedication of relatively unknown Congress workers like Sushil Dhara and Hansadwaj Maity which ensured the continued existence of Congress organisations on the ground. They preferred to remain in complete obscurity as was the case with Sushil Dhara, who, while one of the main figures in the Mahisadal Congress, had not attended any major conferences as a Midnapur delegate until after 1934. Lastly, unlike other districts, the organisation of women was a central theme of the Midnapur Congress. The caste movement of the Mahishyas provided the necessary ground work which enabled school-teacher Charushila Devi to organise a separate women's section of the Congress.

Thus in 1930, when the rest of the Bengal Congress was in the grips of political and organisational crises, Midnapur Congress had built the necessary infrastructure to get on with the work of civil disobedience. So great was the confidence of the district Congress workers, that they were prepared to take on the British Raj without outside aid. As G. Singha, the Dictator of Tamluk Civil Disobedience Council summed up the situation:

> All along Midnapur DCC have been trying to work with as little outside control as possible and they gave practical autonomy to all its subdivisions...(Tamluk DCC) never acted as a branch or was dictated by BCCD or any of the other organisations of Bengal.[43]

42. Forward, 17th and 22nd August, 1928.
43. G. Singha, 'Civil Disobedience in Tamluk', AICC G86/1930 (NMML).

Civil Disobedience in Midnapur

Less than a year before civil disobedience was inaugurated in India, the authorities viewed the situation in Midnapur with amazing complacency. The Commissioner for the Burdwan Division assured his superiors in Calcutta that the situation was not comparable to 1921:

> The Muhammadans stand aloof. Mr. Gandhi is a spent force. There is no great Hindu leader to arouse the masses. Only the Bhadrolok element is likely to be affected...[44]

This optimism had disappeared nine months later. Witnessing the progress of the movement in the district, F. G. Lowman, the Inspector General of Police, wrote in despair:

> I am very pessimistic regarding Midnapore. The whole area through which I travelled...appears to have been thoroughly impregnated with the seeds of Civil Disobedience and I feel that we shall only root out this evil by arresting every single volunteer that we can lay hands on. I had no idea that Congress organisation could enlist the sympathy of such ignorant and uncultivated people..., but the fact remains that they have done so and that their organisation has been extraordinarily good.[45]

The importance of the movement in Midnapur is attested by the fact that in the first phase of the movement (April 1930 to February 1931) 1,426 persons were convicted for participating in the movement out of an all Bengal total of 12,256.[46]

Although the Civil Disobedience Movement was not inaugurated until April 1930, preparations in Midnapur had begun much earlier. As a first gesture of defiance Ram Sundar Singh moved a successful motion in the District Board calling for the Congress flag to be hoisted over the

44. Commissioner to Chief Secy, GOB, 30th September 1929, GOB, H. Poll 403/1929 No. 6 (WBSA).
45. F. G. Lowman to Chief Secy, GOB, 12th June 1930, GOI H. Poll 248/1930 (NAI).
46. The numbers of convictions for other West Bengal districts were: Calcutta 2,289, Bankura 635, Howrah 609, Burdwan 538, 24 Parganas 532, Hoogly 300, Birbhum 94, Murshidabad 88. Nihar 21st April 1931.

District Board building on the 26th January 1930.[47] Independence Day was celebrated by means of a mass rally in Midnapur town, and Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghose and Satish Chandra Dasgupta addressed meetings all over the district explaining the message of the Lahore Congress.[48] In March, a session of the Midnapur District Workers Conference was convened in the Narajole kutchery and was attended by 1,700 activists. The Conference made organisational preparations for the coming campaign and appointed a Dictator and a cabinet of five Congressmen to conduct the struggle.[49] Later all the subdivisional Congress Committees were given virtual organisational autonomy. And as a first test of the mass movement, the Congress successfully called for a boycott of the by-elections to the Legislative Councils necessitated by the resignation of Congress legislators.[50] The overwhelming success of this boycott was an important indicator of the popular support for the Congress among the propertied sections of the population.

The breaking of salt laws which Gandhi intended as a symbolic gesture of defiance, had a particularly strong appeal for the people of Contai and Tamluk. In the days before private salt manufacture was banned in India, Contai and Tamluk, being coastal areas, were major centres of salt production. Not surprisingly therefore both the regions were selected as centres for the inaugration of civil disobedience. Volunteers from all over Bengal flocked to Contai, Tamluk and Ghatal to initiate the campaign. The BPCC-controlled BPCDC organised six centres in the district under their direct supervision and a contingent of the Deshbandhu Civil Disobedience Platoon was despatched to Daspur in Ghatal.[51] But most of the 60 illicit salt manufacturing centres that mushroomed in the district by June 1930 were organised through local Congress initiative and not as a reult of the activities of volunteers from outside.[52] In fact the Dictator of the Tamluk CDC complained "that though asked for, BPCC never rendered the least help to Tamluk..."[53]

47. D. B. Progs, 25th January 1930.
48. Liberty, 21st and 31st January 1930.
49. Liberty, 22nd March 1930.
50. So successful was this election boycott, that in the Tamluk constituency, only 455 of a registered 11,564 bothered to vote; in 17 of the 26 election centres, voting did not exceed 10. Jud-Gen XV/11/1930 (MRR).
51. AICC G86 KW(I)/1930 (NMML), GOI H. Poll 14/20/1931 (NAI).
52. Nihar, 3rd June 1930.
53. AICC G86/1930 (NMML).

In the case of Midnapur, as with the rest of Bengal, it was the gross over-reaction of the authorities that transformed civil disobedience from a volunteer movement to a mass movement. One of the centres of the Congress operation was Pichaboni where Jhareshwar Majhi had already had a Congress organisation going locally, and which was only 15 miles from Contai town.[54] Here on 6th April, the salt laws were broken by Congress volunteers. The police retaliated by arresting Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghose, Pramatha Nath Bannerjee and Prafulla Chandra Sen and systematically beating up all volunteers including women. The reported assault on women volunteers said to be led by Shamsudduha, the Additional Superintendent of Police, was given wide publicity by the Congress which described Contai as under a 'Police Raj'.[55] The police action had the effect of drawing in the villagers to the movement. The situation was very tense and at Gopinathpur when the police contingent attacked a satyagraha centre, an infuriated crowd chased the local daroga and a jamadar to a local school building. The building was then set on fire by the crowd and the two escaped with their lives because of the rescue efforts of two volunteers. The subdivisional officer, Mr. Gaffur, hurried to the place accompanied by 150 policemen and began an indiscriminate wave of repression which led to local people abandoning their villages for a week.[56] The spontaneous outbreak of the crowd at Gopinathpur was also due to the fact that the police, while attacking the satyagrahis had also disrupted the proceedings of a busy hath.[57]

On the 1st June 1930, a police party was pelted with stones at Potapdighi village in Potashpur thana, following the arrest of some local Congressmen. Thereafter, the ASP, Mr. Shamsuddoha arrived on the scene with 25 armed policemen and looted the entire village. A crowd of about 200 collected near the village and hurled stones at the police. The police then fired into the crowd and killed two villagers.[58] On the 6th June 1930, the police fired into another crowd at Balishai, a small market

54. P. J. Griffiths to Burrows, Commissioner, 25th June 1934, GOB H. Poll 325/1934 (WBSA).
55. Liberty, 20th April 1930.
56. 'The Bengal Council of Civil Disobedience Calcutta: A Brief Account of its Work' AICC G86/1930 (NMML).
57. Nihar 27th May 1930.
58. AICC G86/1930 (NMML).

centre near Contai town.

The spreading news of police atrocities, plus the clever use of busy haths as sites for breaking salt laws, enabled the Congress actively to involve the local population in the civil disobedience movement. On the 4th June 1930, when the police went to Chechua hath to arrest four volunteers, the market crowd attacked them and killed two Sub-Inspectors. A police party was then stationed in the area. But this caused so much resentment that the Congress was able to mobilise a crowd of 6,000 people which attacked the police camp from three sides. In the battle that ensued, eight villagers were killed and 22 injured, but the police were forced to abandon their camp.[59] Until a large contingent of punitive police arrived to retrieve the situation, the government, by their own admission, lost control of the ten mile radius surrounding Chechua hath.[60]

The indiscriminate use of violence by the police was a major factor in developing the salt satyagraha in Midnapur into a mass movement. The news of police atrocities was successfully used by the Congress to harden the attitude of the local people against the government. Nor were these stories all concocted. A non-official enquiry committee led by J. N. Basu, a member of the Legislative Council, came to the conclusion:

> The Police generally acted with deliberate and indiscriminate violence for which there was no justification on the ground of upholding law and order or otherwise. The destruction of houses and belongings was wholly unjustifiable and showed a a serious deterioration and degradation in the quality and standard of administration. The acts were such that instead of inspiring respect for law, they brought the administration into widespread hatred and contempt.[61]

The publication of this Report or the general widespread condemnation of the Midnapur incidents did not have any effect on the hard-line

59. GOI H. Poll 14/20/1931 (NAI)
60. Report by Md. Karim, ADM, 7th June 1930, GOI H. Poll 248/1930 (NAI).
61. 'Law and Order in Midnapur 1930. As contained in the Reports of the Non-Official Enquiry Committee' Calcutta 1930, p.17 GOB H. Poll 249/1930 (WBSA).

approach of the district authorities. Refusing to understand the political aspects of civil disobedience, James Pedie, the District Magistrate commented with alarming callousness:

> I see very little hope of any measure of peace until we have had a few more shootings.[62]

Tied to government heavy-handedness was the conscious use of Muslim officials to quell a population that was overwhelmingly Hindu. Gaffur and Shamsuddoha, were both Muslims. In fact Pedie consciously attempted to use the few Muslims in the district as a bulwark against Congress. In every village he visited, he first took any Muslims there were aside and tried to solicit information.[63] At Bhagawanpur, a centre of the movement, the local daroga-Rehayat Bux - personally organised gangs of Muslims to loot villages and terrorise the people.[64] Besides increasing communal antagonisms, this policy had the paradoxical effect of hardening people's attitude against the government.

Secondly, the timing of the Salt Satyagraha (April to August) coincided with the slack season for cultivators. This meant that crowds at haths and satyagraha centres were more inclined to observe, if not actually participate in, the proceedings. Congress volunteers made full use of this phenomenon, taking care to show their defiance of law at crowded gatherings where police action was bound to generate a great deal of excitement. It was a not uncommon strategy for transforming a crowd of observers into an active body of participants.

Nevertheless, with the coming of the monsoons and the return of the cultivators into the fields, the Congress leadership had to alter their style of agitation. No longer was it possible to rely on the anger and spontaneity of the impersonal crowd; it was necessary to extend the influence of the Civil Disobedience Movement into the community as a whole. The chosen issue was the chaukidari tax. Whereas it was possible to break the salt laws by the 'voluntarism' of the committed

62. Pedie to Chief Secy, GOB, 12 June 1930, GOI H. Poll 248/1930 (NAI).
63. Interview with S. K. Gupta, Calcutta, August 1978.
64. Prabodh Chandra Basu, Bhagawanpur Thanar Ithibritta, Calcutta 1976 pp. 127-8.

few, the task of compelling the rural community as a whole not to pay chaukidari taxes was more challenging. In this campaign, the heroism of the individual would be politically ineffective; what was needed was the collective determination of the community to risk not lathis and bullets, but large-scale state appropriation of their property. Hence, the issue of non-payment of the chaukidari tax concerned not merely the individual, but the whole family. It was a movement that required less activism, but no less determination.

It was in the anti-chaukidari tax campaign that the sustained efforts of the Congress since 1921 bore fruit. The nature of the movement meant that an organised political presence was required in almost every village of the district. Moreoever in a rural society where the tradition of independent organisations was noticeably absent among the poor, the success of such a movement depended on the political support given to it by the more prosperous section of the community i.e. those who controlled land. It was to this section that the poor looked for a political lead and, more often, for their livelihood. The absence of any radical tradition made paternalism and primordial loyalties very powerful forces in Midnapur. It was in this context that Sasmal's strategy of enlisting the support of the propertied rural population was to prove invaluable.

The caste factor too was of some significance. The Mahishya caste movement in the first quarter of the century not only elevated the caste in the ritual hierarchy, but established a strong sense of pride in being Mahishya. This gave Contai and Tamluk, where Mahishyas dominated both economically and numerically, a strong sense of communal solidarity. On a political level, caste reinforced, ideologically, the levels of dependence that had been established by control of land. This ideological caste solidarity was a crucial factor in sustaining the Civil Disobedience Movement in the face of very severe repression. The success of the Movement in the Sabang thana can also be attributed to the communal solidarity that existed among the Santhals through the mediation of the tribe. The failure of the second Civil Disobedience Movement to get off the ground in parts of Ghatal and Sadar subdivisions can be partially attributed

to the lack of solidarity resulting from the absence of a dominant caste or tribe.

Lastly, the popular aspects of this new phase in the Civil Disobedience Movement must be emphasised. In earlier chapters we have examined the failure of the colonial government to acquire political legitimacy through its administrative structures.[65] The government's attempts to gain a greater control over rural Midnapur through the establishment of Union Boards was foiled by a popular movement arising out of local factional disputes.[66] The authorities were therefore put in the rather unenviable situation of wanting to do away with the old chaukidari system but not having the required political muscle to introduce Union Boards. This ensured that one of the most potent sources of all-class rural discontent remained in existence awaiting to be exploited by Congress agitators. The movement against the chaukidari tax was therefore, to use the terminology of Laclau the instrument of 'popular democratic interpellation' in what was posed as a 'people/power bloc' contradiction.[67]

The first stage of the anti-chaukidari tax campaign involved crippling the administrative apparatus of the tax collection. This entailed asking or forcing village chaukidars and daffadars to resign from their posts.

The exact number of chaukidars who resigned is not known, but Congress records suggest widespread success for the movement (see Table 7:2) and the government put the total number of resignations for the district as a whole at around 1,000.[68] There can be little doubt that the resignation of the chaukidars resulted in the general dislocation of the district administrative machinery. James Pedie, the District Magistrate described the situation:

> At the worst period practically the whole of Tamluk and Contai subdivisions plus the thanas of Mohanpur, Dantan Narayangarh and Sabang of Sadar subdivision were out of hand. There were no chaukidars, daffadars; Presidents Panchayat, even when loyal, could do nothing; processes

65. See Chapter 2.
66. See Chapter 5.
67. Ernesto Laclau Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory, London 1979, pp. 143-198.
68. Pedie to H. Tuffnell-Barrett, 7-10th January 1931, GOB H. Poll 249/1930 No. 2 (WBSA).

TABLE 7:2

Resignation of Chaukidars in Midnapur During the Civil Disobedience Movement

Thana	Resignations	Total Chaukidars
Sabang	103	175
Narayangarh+	19	174
Contai	56	282
Patashpur	113	200
Dantan	41(?)	183
Khejuri	60(?)	125
Bhagawanpur	101	213
Ramnager	54	137

+ Figures only from Union No. 4 and 5 available.

Source: AICC G86/1930 (NMML)

> were not being served; serious crime was not being reported; practically no complaints were being received by the SDO's; and to such an extent had some of the areas got out of hand that the D.M. and A. D. M. were insulted by cultivators in the worst manner possible and Congress in their bulletins, which were issued daily, pointed out that our attempts to reason with the people were only signs of weakness.[69]

Government officers believed that Congress coercion was the main factor responsible for the mass resignations. No doubt there was an element of truth behind this contention. Congress volunteers harassed serving chaukidars and made life miserable for them. Thus chaukidar Adhar Bag of Sindumuri village (Sabang thana) was socially boycotted and refused labour for cultivation as a result of which his sugar cane crop died. In Subhi village (Nandigram thana) the paddy crop of Upendra Nath Jana, Panchayat President, and daffadar Ramnath Dinda were destroyed in the dead of night. The house of daffadar Adhaita Charen Hurait of Dulalpur village (Potashpur thana) was looted and his property destroyed as he had refused to resign.[70] Even zamindars were not spared. Rai Saheb Tripura Charan Ghose, who was also the President of the Panchayat, was attacked by his own tenants when he asked them to pay taxes. He was subsequently socially boycotted and could obtain no agricultural labour or even supplies of milk; the artists of the village also refused to make the images of Durga for his puja.[71] These incidents show the impact of village solidarity; few chaukidars could afford to risk social ostracism as they were dependent on other villagers for services.

The response to the Congress call for the non-payment of the chaukidari tax was also considerable and, in some cases, spontaneous. In Sabang, where nearly all Congress volunteers had been arrested previously, only 432 out of 15,536 paid their chaukidari tax.[72] According to Congress reports, in Union No. 7 of Contai thana only

69. GOB H. Poll 249/1930 No. 2 (WBSA).
70. GOI H. Poll 14/20/1931 (NAI).
71. 'General Note on Tamluk', 29th December 1930, GOB H. Poll 249/1930 No. 2C (WBSA).
72. 'Challenge' 11th August 1930, AICC G86/1930 (NMML).

68 of the 1,718 ratepayers paid the tax; and in Union No. 4 of Mahisadal thana, only Rs 600 of Rs 1,600 were paid.[73] So strong was the response to the Congress campaign, the villagers risked large scale property attachments and ruthless beating up of individuals. Congress sources told of Gokulnager village (Moyna thana) where the villagers refused to pay their tax of Rs 11/4 and consequently had 29 houses, 3 granaries, 2 cowsheds and one kutchery house burnt down by the police; yet not a single anna of the tax was paid.[74] In the same thana not a single individual reportedly paid his taxes and the police destroyed Rs 1,000 worth of property.[75] When civil disobedience was resumed after the inconclusive 2nd Round Table Conference, the non-payment of chaukidari tax was resumed. This time the government was better prepared and immediately banned all Congress organisations. Repression was far more severe but the anti-chaukidari tax campaign no less effective. Fearing large-scale destruction of their property, villagers organised watches to spot approaching police contingents. When the police party was sighted the entire village was evacuated in minutes with villagers taking their cattle and valuables with them.[76] Attachments, when they were made, were particularly severe. In villages Saterchak and Girichak (Mahisadal thana), 6 cows and 2 bullocks worth Rs 200 were attached for non-payment of Rs 7 chaukidari tax.[77] Moveable property worth Rs 150 belonging to Advaita Charen Pramanick of Gholepukur (Bhagawanpur thana) was attached for non-payment of Rs 3 - 8 in tax.[78] When punitive tax was imposed, the repression was further intensified. The villagers of Rajarampore, Mahisgoth, Barbaichlaria and Chaksimulia (Mahisadal thana) were given less than a month to pay a total of Rs 1,000 in punitive tax. In Nandigram, Congress sources reported that 79 people including children died of exposure and starvation after leaving their homes to prevent the payment of punitive tax which was assessed at four times the chaukidari tax.[79]

The success of the Congress campaign against chaukidari tax had severe repercussions on the morale of the British government. The British officials who were accustomed to viewing the Civil Disobedience

73. AICC G86/1930 (NMML).
74. 'The BCCD: a Brief Account of Its Work', Part II, AICC G86/1930 (NMML).
75. Ibid.
76. Report by SDO Contai, 28th August 1930. GOB H. Poll 249/1930 No2C (WBSA).
77. Advance, 1st October 1932.
78. Advance, 30th November 1932.
79. Advance, 8th January 1933.

Movement as a 'law and order' problem were particulary disheartened after large troop stationing, route marches, forcing people to salute the Union Jack, imprisonment and attachments failed to improve the tax collections substantially.[80] The Congress movement had cost the government its political credibility, and the effect this had on the poorer sections of the population was remarkable. A frustrated Additional District Magistrate summed up the prevalent official feeling:

> The ordinary cultivator even when reasoned with, simply squatted on his haunches and laughing sarcastically said, 'We know how powerful the Sarkar is. Formerly even the zamindar of Narajole had to make an appointment with the DM and the ADM before he would find an opportunity to see them. Now we find the DM and the ADM coming round to us, villagers, begging us to pay our taxes.[81]

Indeed, the Civil Disobedience Movement cost the government its last ounce of political credibility in Midnapur.

Although the Civil Disobedience Movement, unlike the Non-Cooperation Movement, did not at any point rule out any compromise with the British government, the Congress in Midnapur set about undermining the basic legitimacy of the colonial rule by setting up its own courts of law. Like the chaukidari tax campaign, the establishment of parallel arbitration courts depended on the ability of the Congress first to undermine the existing structures of colonial rule, and secondly to acquire that degree of political credibility itself to be able effectively to enforce its decisions. Hence it was an exercise in establishing Congress, not merely as a political party, but as the legitimate political authority in the district.

The Congress took advantage of the political impasse following the Gandhi-Irwin Pact to get the parallel courts off the ground with

80. General note by the ADM Midnapur, 3rd November 1930, GOB H. Poll 249/1930 No. 28 (WBSA). The entire pattern of official repression has not been descibed in any detail in the chapter.
81. GOB H. Poll 249/1930 No. 28 (WBSA).

the minimum of government interference.[82] The courts were set up in early 1931 with the idea that the political truce between Congress and the government would be short lived. Working from this assumption the Congress attempted to replace its organisation for the village police thereby working "upon the minds of those who are at the moment undecided which side to take"[83] In fact the terms of the Pact, which legalised the private manufacture of salt, released the political prisoners and halted the collection of outstanding punitive tax, was seen by the Congress and the population of Midnapur as a complete vindication of the agitational programme. In this jubilant mood, Congress was provided with a conducive atmosphere in which to initiate their parallel courts.[84]

There were at least 31 parallel courts established in Midnapur, of which 16 were in the Tamluk subdivision alone. It was only in southern Midnapur that the courts appear to have had any significant impact. The courts confined themselves to civil disputes only, though the Salishi Board at Chongra Chak (Moyna thana) also reviewed criminal cases. The courts were best organised in Mahisadal where villages had three courts - pratham consisting of young men, maddham of elder men and uttam of the old men.[85] The maddham courts possessed certain revisional powers. The courts acquired some legitimacy among the people, so much so, that on one occasion it was in session until 5a.m. At Sutahata, the Congress establishing roving courts which toured the villages settling disputes of all sorts. A fee ranging between Rs 1 and Rs 1-4 was also charged per petition. The Congress also planned to establish a hierarchy of courts, with an Appeal Court in the subdivisional headquarters, but in fact they did not go beyond the village level.

In the absence of any 'independent' sources it is difficult to form any balanced view of the impact these parallel courts may have had on the district. From government sources it appears that the courts had a substantial authority in Tamluk, but less so in Contai where the

82. The government was caught unaware and did not know how to deal with this phenomenon. After all, the establishment of arbitration courts was not an offence in itself. GOI H. Poll 14/8/1931 (NAI).
83. Chief Secy, GOB to Commissioner, 19th May 1931, GOB H. Poll 335/1931 No. 3 (WBSA).
84. F. R. March (1) 1931, GOI H. Poll 18/3/31.
85. Commissioner to Chief Secy, GOB, 28th May 1931 GOB H. Poll 335/1931 No. 5 (WBSA) Significantly women were excluded, though they formed a major part of the movement.
86. D. M. to Commissioner, 26th May 1931, GOB H. Poll 335/1931 No. 5A (WBSA).

local Bar viewed their growth with obvious disapproval.[87] On the whole the courts depended on communal acquiescence for their authority, defaulters or violators risking social excommunication. Thus it was possible for the Contai court to order a tenant to pay Rs 36 to his superior landlord, or the Ranichak court to fine one Mahendra Jana for assault. But occasionally this authority did not hold. In a custody case, when the Congress court assigned a child to the father's care, the disgruntled mother filed a regular case in the subdivisional court.[88]

In the final analysis, the evidence suggests that the parallel courts were effective in precisely those regions where Congress support corresponded with the existing power structure or traditional caste cluster at the base. This would explain why the courts were successful in Tamluk and Contai where a dominant caste status of the Mahishyas also corresponded with their control of the land. In that sense, the parallel courts cannot be equated with the Marxist notion of 'dual power' as it did not entail a disruption in the existing patterns of class domination; they arose in the abnormal situation of a breakdown of the political legitimacy of foreign rule. This is in no way to deny the fact that considering the enormity of the project, the establishment of parallel courts, along with the other manifestations of the Civil Disobedience Movement, was a success story for the Midnapur Congress.

Social Character of the Civil Disobedience Movement in Midnapur

Midnapur occupies a very prominent place in Bengali nationalist mythology. Of late, with the greater access to private papers of leading nationalist politicians and their supporters, the role played by the Indian bourgeoisie in the national struggle is coming into great prominence. Along with this realisation, there is a growing tendency in Indian historiography to discover conflicting trends in the nationalist movement; a first one under the firm grip of the Congress 'right wing' and the bourgeoisie,

87. Report of F. W. Kidd, S.P. Midnapur, 11th June 1931, GOB H. Poll 335/1931 No. 15 (WBSA).
88. GOI H. Poll 14/8/1931 (NAI).

and a second that was more militant and therefore a threat not only to colonial rule, but also to the indigenous social order, especially to the likes of Birla, Thakurdas and Shri Ram. Midnapur is cited as an instance of this second trend.[89] Undoubtedly the participants in the Civil Disobedience Movements displayed great courage and determination in their fight against the repression of the colonial state. But sheer militancy does not in itself make any movement a threat to the existing social order just as militant wage demands do not pave the way for socialism. In India, the national bourgeoisie accepted the need for sporadic mass mobilisations against the imperial power to exact an increasing number of concessions and the Civil Disobedience Movement was part of such a strategy.[90] Moreover, though the national bourgeoisie commanded almost absolute ideological hegemony in the national movement, it did not possess a corresponding role economically or politically. Hence it was compelled to ally itself with seemingly radical 'socialistic' forces advocating a state capitalist development for India.[91] In such a situation, only a working-class-led upsurge committed to socialism as the stage of Indian development could realistically have posed any threat to the national bourgeoisie.[92]

At the height of the second Civil Disobedience Movement, when government repression had reached a fierce pitch, more than 10,000 people were arrested in Contai and Tamluk alone.[93] These high figures reveal the popularity of the Congress struggle among the people of Midnapur. To the extent that people from nearly all sections of society actively participated in the movement, it might be possible to describe it as popular in the sense of embracing all the people. Such a conclusion would necessarily consist of an analysis of the 'crowd' minus considerations of programme or leadership. While noting the existence

89. The most notable example of this form of historiography is Sumit Sarkar, op.cit.
90. Jairus Banaji , op.cit. pp. 25-31.
91. K. N. Raj, The Politics and Economics of Intermediate Regimes, R. R. Kale Memorial Lecture 1973, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics n.d.
92. This argument is explained briefly by A.R. Desai 'The "Two Stages" Theory of Revolutions in the Third World' in A.R.Desai (ed), Peasant Struggles in India, Oxford 1979, pp. 751-9. Also see Leon Trotsky, Permanent Revolution and Results and Prospects, New York 1970; and Alex Callinicos, 'Simply a Matter of Time?', New Statesman, 16th November 1979, pp. 768-9.
93. AICC 4/1932 (NMML) Figures for January to July 1932.

of people from all social classes in the crowd, it is only the examination of the latter facets that provide us with the necessary clues to ascertain the social character of the movement.

In a note to the government during the early stages of the movement, Sir B. L. Mitter, the Law Member, spoke of the 'young zamindars' siding actively with the Congress.[94] The age factor might not have been crucial in deciding the attitude of the Midnapur zamindars, but all evidence points towards zamindars in the district being favourably disposed towards the Congress. One of the biggest zamindars of the district, Devendralal Khan of Narajole, was a leading Congressmen though he personally remained rather inactive when repression was intensified. However his secretary, Jnanendranath Bose, organised his political affairs and courted imprisonment on behalf of his mentor, and the Narajole kutchery was requisitioned by government for the use of the troops stationed in Midnapur town. The zamindari family of Das Mahapatra was among the leading lights of the Congress organisation of Panchrole; the Raja of Tamluk, the Dulai family in Tamluk and the zamindars of Kuai in Contai were among the other zamindars in the forefront of the movement. The younger sons of the Nandas of Mugberia participated actively, as did Sachindra Nath Maity, the son of lawyer Upendra Nath Maity who had good connections with the landed families of Midnapur. But in a society where petty zamindars abounded, the distinction between zamindars and jotedars was not of any major consequences. What is definite is that that the wealthier sections of the rural population gave solid support and leadership of the movement. The authorities too were well aware of this and in their attachment operations came down heaviest on this section. The Congress files provide a wealth of details alleging the financial losses suffered by those participating in the movement. Thus at Paikbazar in Contai, the leaders, the zamindari Kayla family, were assessed at Rs 18 chaukidari tax, and were looted of valuables worth Rs 2,600. From the house of Hrishikesh Ghosh of Mohanpur in Garbetta, the police looted Rs 2,000 in cash notes, Rs 1,250 in silver, 39 gold sovereigns, 400 tolas of gold, 100 tolas of silver and brass utensils weighing 50 to 60 maunds. This was perhaps an exception, and Banamali Manna of Gokulpur (Moyna thana) was more typical of the average village

94. Note by Sir B. L. Mitter, 15th May 1930, GOI H. Poll 248/II/1930 (NAI).

leadership. He was assessed at Rs 2 - 8 chaukidari tax, possessed 4 houses and a granary containing 100 maunds of paddy. In the same village was also Parameshwar Bhunia, assessed at Rs 1 - 4 in chaukidari tax, possessing 3 houses and a granary, and Trailakshya Manna assessed at Rs 1 - 8, possessing 4 houses and a cowshed.[95] These figures do not reveal the total income and wealth of the families, but merely that which was destroyed or expropriated by the police. But they do suggest strongly that the leadership of the movement was firmly in the hands of the prosperous elements in rural society. This is also the conclusion of Atulya Ghose who organised the movement in Arambagh, in the neighbouring district of Hoogly.[96]

Besides ideological considerations, notably a strong emotive nationalism, economic considerations also determined the behaviour of the leadership. The economic depression which hit India affected the prices of agricultural commodities greatly. The prosperous ryots, jotedars and zamindars were the only section of the peasant community who had a disposable surplus in their hands. The slump in prices affected their livelihood the most, as they depended on selling to provide a major part of their income.

The participation of this section of the rural population also determined the Congress decision to concentrate on the non-payment of chaukidari taxes rather than advocate non-payment of rent. The acts of defiance against individual zamindars must not be seen as aspects of an imaginary class struggle but as that resulting from their political opposition to the Congress. Thus the decision of the people of Mahisadal not to pull the rath (chariot) of the Garga family during the Jagannath festival was not a result of any anti-zamindari activity of the Congress, but of the family's refusal to hoist the Congress flag on the rath.[97] In fact, the inauguration of the Civil Disobedience Movement coincided with a concerted onslaught by the jotedars to collect 1 to 1½ maunds of paddy per bigha from the bhagchasis, in addition to half the harvested crop. Moreover, this jotedar onslaught occurred in precisely those areas, like Hijli, Khejuri, Keoramal and Hara, where the Congress had a strong presence.[98]

95. These have been compiled from 'The BCCD: A Brief Account of Its Work, Part 2' AICC G86/1930 (NMML).
96. Atulya Ghose, 'Kashta Kalpita' 31, Desh 31st December 1977, p.41.
97. Advance, 20th July 1932.
98. Nihar, 12th and 26th May, 1931.

In Khejuri, the local Congress leader, Nikunja Behari Maity, had to intervene to prevent the jotedars exacting these illegal dues after the bhagchasis had organised themselves against the jotedars.[99] There is no evidence to suggest that the Congress, in other parts of the district, took any action to safeguard the interests of the bhagchasis. In fact, Nikunja Behari Maity's settlement in Khejuri resulted in some significant victories for the jotedars including their right to collect half the hay. It is also to be noted that it was only in the lands held by the European-owned Midnapur Zamindari Company that Congress advised tenants not to pay rents; this campaign resulted in losses for the company between 1932 and 1935.[100] So strongly was the Congress identified with the rural rich, that it was possible for some radicalised activists to initiate a Kisan movement in Contai denouncing Congress as a 'capitalist' organisation,[101] or for others to initiate a bhagchasi movement in Sutahata.[102] It is not surprising that Tamluk subdivision, a stronghold of the Congress until as late as 1967, also became a stronghold of the Communist Party and one of the centres of the 1946-47 Tebhaga Movement directed against the jotedars.[103]

No less active in their support for the Civil Disobedience Movement were the merchants and traders. The shopkeepers of Contai town decided to observe a week's hartal following the arrest of Gandhi in April 1930. They cut off all food supplies to the local British officials and the District Magistrate had to make arrangements for the direct supply of provisions.[104] In July 1930, 600 maunds of Liverpool salt lay untouched in Midnapur town railway station because of blacking by carters and local shopkeepers.[105] Some traders in the towns refused to sell foreign cloth, sugar and cigarettes made by the Imperial Tobacco Company for fear of being harassed by Congress picketers, especially women who participated in the picket of shops.[106] But coercion could not have been the determing factor. Even after government troops had restored the formal authority of the Raj, traders refused to stock British goods.

99. Nihar, 30th June 1931.
100. Oral Evidence of the MZC. Report of the Bengal Land Revenue Commission, 1940, Vol IV, pp. 248-9.
101. Proceedings of the Revenue Conference, 14th June 1938, GOB H. Poll 283/1938 (WBSA).
102. P. J.Griffiths to Commissioner, 10th August 1934 GOB H. Poll 325/1934 (WBSA).
103. Sunil Sen, Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47, Delhi 1972, pp 43-44.
104. Liberty 9th April 1930.
105. Telegram P. No 1747 P.S. GOB to GOI Home Dept, 10th April 1930, GOI H. Poll 248/1930 (NAI).

In April 1933, the District Magistrate specially convened a meeting for traders to persuade them to sell British-manufactured goods.[107] When punitive tax was imposed, the traders were singled out for especially severe treatment and 'special' taxes were levied on all those sympathetic to Congress.[108] Purnanda Sanyal of Sanyal Brothers in Midnapur town, who was later to become a Dictator of the Local Civil Disobedience Council, had to vacate his coal godown on the instructions of the police.[109] Kishan Chandra Saha, the proprietor of Saha and Company, Surendra Nath Setua, a cloth merchant and Gosto Behari Dutta, a hardware merchant, were among the numerous traders arrested and sent for trial for closing their shops on hartal days.[110] The Congress on its part, also went out of its way to secure the support of the traders. Prominent Congressmen like Sitaram Sakseria, Basantalal Murarka and Krishnadasji, who had credibility among the trading community in Calcutta, were brought to Midnapur to influence the traders in the district.[111] A Congress-inspired Trade Association was set up in Midnapur town by Binoy Jiban Ghose and Sadananda Sanyal to stop the sales of foreign goods and promote indigenous manufacturers.[112] So great was the Congress influence that even the Asiatic Circus held a charity performance and contributed Rs 445-7 to the district Congress coffers.[113]

In terms of economic functions, the shopkeepers, traders and merchants could be broadly grouped under the term 'marketeers'. The marketeers were certainly dependent on their ties with British commerce and industry, more so than their Indian 'industrial' counterparts. This was inevitable in a situation where Indian industry, except in certain sectors, was still in its infancy and indigenous manufacture scarce. However paradoxically, it was this group that was also a leading element in the nationalist struggle. Certainly in Midnapur, where the purchasing power of consumers was relatively small, more so in the light of the depression, the marketeers had little to gain economically by supporting the Congress boycott programme. Yet in Midnapur, as in the rest of India, economic instincts were not

106. Liberty, 24th July 1930.
107. Advance, 27th April 1933.
108. Ibid, 13th June 1933.
109. Ibid, 28th August 1932.
110. Ibid, 2nd and 15th October 1932.
111. Ibid, 29th December 1931.
112. Ibid, 9th July 1931.
113. Ibid, 22nd July 1931.

pursued to their logical political conclusion. The emotive ideological impact of nationalism was to contribute partially to this phenomenon. Rajat Ray has also suggested that the trading difficulties encountered by the marketeers in the twenties and the thirties radicalised them as a body and moved them closer to nationalist politics.[114] Also to be considered are the trading links the marketeers of Midnapur had with the Marwari community of Calcutta, who were the leading financiers of the Congress movement.[115]

The prominent role played by men of property in the Civil Disobedience Movement in Midnapur ensured that the movement was in little danger of being radicalised in any socialist direction. It should always be borne in mind that the ryots who formed the backbone of the Midnapur Congress were not an undifferentiated lot and consisted in part of both of cultivators with two to three bighas of land, and of jotedars with over a hundred bighas in their possession, who employed bhagchasis and agricultural labour and who combined cultivation with sub-landlordism. However, with the momentum of the struggle and in recognition of the difficulties faced in East Bengal where Congress was strongly identified with the Hindu zamindari interests, various 'centrist' currents arose within the Congress itself.[116] A prime example of this was Bankim Mukherjee's motion at the 1931 Behrampur Provincial Conference which urged the BPCC "to identify itself with the cause of the vast peasantry of Bengal with the intention of starting country wide no-rent and no-tax campaign..."[117] What lay behind this and other seemingly radical proposals was the assumption of a simple division in the countryside between 'peasants' and 'zamindars'; the complexities in the actual pattern of land control and the differentiation of the peasantry was not taken into account. Hence the Kisan Sabha could glibly talk of an

114. Rajat Ray, pp. 309-10.
115. A link can be detected in that it was contingents from Midnapur who were sent to the predominantly Marwari Burrabazar area of Calcutta to picket those shops dealing in foreign cloth. Panchanan Ghoshal, Police Kahini, Calcutta 1382 B.S. pp. 75-92.
116. The most accurate analysis of centrism is offered by Trotsky: "Speaking formally and descriptively, centrism is composed of all those trends within the proletariat and on its periphery which most often represent various stages of evolution from reformism to Marxism...or vice versa. Both Marxism and reformism have a solid social support underlying them. Marxism represents the historical interests of the proletariat. Reformism speaks for the privileged position of the proletarian bureaucracy and aristocracy within the capitalist state. Centrism as we have known it in the past, did not have and could not have an independent social foundation" Leon Trotsky, The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany, New York, 1971 pp. 210-11.

anti-zamindari peasant unity which was valid only as a single-issue campaign. In any case, bhagchasis and agricultural labour were by definition and practice excluded from this mythical alliance. As Barrington Moore astutely pointed out:

> Revolutionaries cannot appeal to the rural proletariat, even under peaceful guises without antagonising the mass of small and medium peasants.[118]

When Congress spoke of representing the interests of the 'peasants', they meant the propertied sections of the peasantry. And as Hobsbawm has remarked, this normally means a movement devoted to securing the interests of the rich peasants.[119] In spite of its remarkable militancy, the large-scale involvement of the rural people and even the organised intervention of low castes like the Satgopes and the Namasudras,[120] the Civil Disobedience Movement in Midnapur remained confined to a struggle for political independence from British rule; it challenged the legitimacy of British rule not its state structures.[121]

117. The motion was narrowly defeated. GOB H. Poll 839/1931 Pt. K. W. (WBSA).
118. J. Barrington Moore, Jr, Social Origins of Dictatorship and and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World, London 1967, p.384.
119. E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Peasants and Politics', Journal of Peasant Studies, Vol I, 1.
120. GOB H. Poll 249/1930 (WBSA).
121. D. Simeon, 'A Historical Characterisation of Indian Nationalism' unpublished paper, Modern History Seminar, Delhi University 27th January 1978.

Appendix 2

A Note on Terrorism in Midnapur 1930-34

"The revolvers of individual heroes instead of the people's cudgels and pitchforks ; bombs instead of barricades - that is the real formula of terrorism".
Leon Trotsky [1]

Ever since the Swadeshi movement and the 'martyrdom' of Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki, terrorism had exercised a considerable hold on the bhadrolok youth of Bengal. Impatient with the methods of the traditional 'mass' politicians, a large section of youth saw in terrorism the only viable and uncompromising opposition to British rule. This hold was reinforced by an almost aesthetic rejection of the 'primitivism' and non-violence creed of Gandhism. According to Bhupati Majumdar, a member of the so-called Jugantar Party:

> Gandhi's name was almost nauseating to us. I said that he wanted that cowards should be more cowardly to get independence. What did he mean by it ? The only way left was to fight and fight with modern weapons. There was no other way out[2].

Indeed, the appeal was "more emotional than intellectual"[3], and this was cultivated by popular Bengali authors such as Sarat Chandra Chatterji who gave terrorism a distinctly romantic touch in Pather Dabi. This romantic aura was further perpetuated by the daring Chittagong Armoury Raid and the heroic last stand of the 'revolutionaries' in the Jallalabad mountains overlooking Chittagong. Moreover, Gandhi's uncompromising hostility to all forms of armed action did not help matters either. His condemnation of 'Bhagat Singh worship', which he characterised as 'goondaism and degradation'[4], merely increased the unorthodox appeal of the terrorist tradition.

The hostility of right-wing Tory politicians and spokesmen for the European community to the Indian nationalist movement, especially during Civil Disobedience, further increased the appeal of terrorism. In the

1. Leon Trotsky, Against Individual Terrorism, New York 1974, p 13.
2. Interview with Bhupati Majumdar, Oral History Transcript, 235, NMML, p 11.
3. Interview with Pannalal Dasgupta, Oral History Transcript, 103, p 1.
4. Advance, 31 July 1931.

House of Lords, Lord Elibank demanded that all negotiations with Gandhi should be broken off and government should deport Gandhi and "his fellow conspirators to some island in the Indian Archipelago"[5]. So great was the Tory antipathy to the cause of Indian nationalism, that in the words of Bernard Shaw: "They (Tories) might not merely send him (Gandhi) home, but shoot him. Many Tories would be delighted to do it"[6]. Not to be outdone, the European community in India called for more repressive measures and formed Royalist defence contingents to combat 'sedition'. According to T.Chapman-Mortimer of the West Bengal Branch of the European Association, "The Europeans mean what they say, and the sooner the delusion of other people that we are going to hand over control is broken, the better"[7]. In this atmosphere, the idea of any negotiated settlement with the imperial power did not seem very attractive to nationalist militants.

Government repression further added to the drift to militancy. During the Civil Disobedience movement, the government not only gave itself arbitrary powers of arrest but also passed a Press Bill that effectively muzzled the press. The police carried out indiscriminate raids on Congress offices and beat up demonstrators and picketers. In Midnapur, the District Magistrate was vested with extraordinary powers under the Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act, 1932. The Act was used indiscriminately on all the Congress leaders who had their houses seized by police and who were themselves either imprisoned or banned from the district. All 'bhadrolok' residents were instructed to report the movement of youths in their localities. A teacher of the Hamilton School, Tamluk, was fined Rs 6 by the Subdivisional Officer for failing to report to the thana the departure of his son from Tamluk[8]. In October 1933, the District Magistrate imposed a dusk to dawn curfew on all 'Hindu bhadrolok youth' and forbade them from using bicycles at any .

5. Advance, 26 November 1931.
6. Ibid, 31 October 1931.
7. Ibid, 24 September 1931.
8. Ibid, 20 July 1934.

time[9]. In October 1934, the District Magistrate prohibited all Hindu students, except with special permission, from studying in schools that were situated beyond 3 miles from their homes[10]. Moreover, the army was periodically marched through villages and all local dignitaries were expected to attend and salute the British flag or explain their absence to the local officer[11]. This intense repression effectively served to make open organisation more difficult and forced the militants into small conspiratorial groups.

One particular episode in Midnapur heightened nationalist bitterness and increased the credibility of the 'revenge killing' of individual terrorism. On 16 September 1931, the guards in Hijli jail, a few miles from Kharagpur, opened fire on the prisoners and killed two of the political detenus. This incident provoked widespread condemnation. "Life in Bengal", commented Advance, "has become unsafe. It has become unsafe not because of the ordinary criminals but because of the goondas who are maintained on the taxpayers hard earned money"[12]. The poet Rabindranath Tagore addressed a warning to the government:

> I am here only to give warning on behalf of my countrymen, that a government however proud it may be of its enormous resources for repression of freedom can never afford to lose its dignity... Our people may not have the physical means for resisting injustice but no power can obstruct them from passing moral judgement, and on their judgement must every government, however utterly alien it may be, depend for its very existence[13].

But government was not sensitive to what they saw as periodic outbursts of Bengali emotionalism, and in 1932, appointed a former Commandant of the Hijli Jail as the District Magistrate of Midnapur. In the face of such overt provocation, it is hardly surprising to note that he was shot by terrorists in September 1933.

9. Advance, 8 October 1933.
10. Ibid, 5 October 1934.
11. Ibid, 18 January 1934.
12. Ibid, 19 September 1931.
13. Ibid, 27 September 1931.

However, though the second phase of terrorism in Bengal had its roots in the growing challenge to British rule, its adherents never saw it as a political tactic to supplement an overall strategy. The terrorist conception of politics was predominantly military; they saw the use of arms as the sole expression of militancy. This left them without any concrete strategy for attaining freedom except an optimistic belief that the 'masses' would emulate their actions. Thus, the operation of the Chittagong Armoury Raid was chaotic:

> On that night, Chittagong was in the hands of revolutionaries but they had limited imagination... They were very vague. They raided everything, entire town was in their hands but they did not know what to do next. At that time, the younger generation and their leaders..., did not have the idea how to develop that struggle into some sort of guerilla warfare or to continue it for that kind of thing. Their idea was to give a blow and in the course of it get themselves killed, martyred. ... it was a brave action but not a very imaginative idea.[14]

Moreover, the terrorist tradition flourished most in East Bengal, in an atmosphere of political hostility. The Civil Disobedience movement did not attract the sympathy of the predominantly Muslim population there. In Dacca for example, the outbreak of terrorism coincided with large scale rioting directed against Hindus and nationalists. It was this inability of Congress to get any mass movement off the ground that provided the impetus to the terrorists. Their actions reflected the growing political desperation of the Hindu bhadrolok minority.

Terrorists operating in Midnapur earned some notoriety for their success in assassinating three consecutive District Magistrates between 1930 and 1933. If government reports are to be believed, their actions were very sympathetically received in the district given the widespread police repression. Moreover, the acts of political assassination in

14. Interview with Pannalal Dasgupta, Oral History Transcripts, 103, NMML, p 7 and 9.

Midnapur differed in one major respect from those in other districts of Bengal in that they were carried out in the atmosphere of an existing mass movement. Indeed, the murder of British Magistrates merely complemented the other acts of subversion carried out by the Congress and its sympathisers.

However, while noting the parallel contribution of terrorism to the Civil Disobedience movement in Midnapur, it must be pointed out that the terrorists did not organise in conjunction with the Congress; their activities were quite unrelated to the mainstream of political activity in Midnapur. Though the government attempted to implicate the entire district Congress in the 'terrorist conspiracy',[15] in particular the Bengal National Volunteer group led by Profulla Tripathi, all the non-official accounts point in a separate direction. Atulchandra Basu, for example, suggests that though the terrorists came into active politics via the Bengal National Volunteers, they were then recruited into the terrorist groups by men such as Dinesh Gupta, Sasanka Dasgupta, Parimal Roy, Fanindranath Kundu, Braja Kishore Chakravarty and Shanti Sen, all of whom operated from Calcutta and quite independently of Congress[16]. In fact, given the district Congress' past record of utter hostility to the terrorist tradition, it is hardly surprising that this was indeed the case. Moreover, at times the 'voluntarism' of the terrorist groups, operating from the outside, actually hindered the progress of the Civil Disobedience movement. Atulya Ghose recounts his experiences in Daspur:

> Both Anukul Chakravarti and I were arrested in connection with the murder of a constable in Daspur. Daspur is in the Ghatal sub-division. In 1930 many people had broken the law and courted arrest in Ghatal, but after the murder police oppression was at its peak and seven villages were burnt to the ground.
>
> In 1932 we could not get a favourable response from Ghatal. The reason is quite clear. Where non-violent mass movements have

15. For a particular instance of such obviously fabricated evidence, see P.J.Griffiths to Burrows, 16 June 1934, GOB H.Poll 325/1934 (WBSA).
16. Atulchandra Basu, Medinipure Boma O Pistol, Calcutta 1369 B.S. , pp 132-3.

> occurred, people have knowingly tolerated severe oppression. For non-payment of Rs 2 Chaukidari tax people have allowed their cattle to be confiscated. People have had their lands - their only source of livelihood - attached. But in spite of all this people had not been cowed down. But they could not tolerate oppression simply because some outsiders had come and killed two darogas or three constables. Where villagers had taken an active part, oppression could not crush the movement... Where non-violent movements have assumed popular dimensions, the villagers have been willing to tolerate repression. But they are unwilling to tolerate repression for an act of violence -- which they have not been a party to.[17]

Indeed by its very nature,terrorism remained a minority current in the nationalist movement in Midnapur. A political strategy that depended on mass passivity and change from above was bound to be eclipsed in the wake of a larger movement with mass participation.

17. Atulya Ghose, 'Kashta Kalpita', 31, Desh, 31 December 1977, pp 41-2.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

At the turn of the century, and in consequence of the financial crises of British India, the Raj was compelled to intervene more actively in the affairs of the hitherto untouched localities. In Bengal, as we have seen, this intervention took the form of plugging revenue loopholes in agricultural taxation, introducing new taxes such as the Public Works Cess, streamlining the complex array of tenancy legislation, bringing village government within the orbit of officialdom, and expanding the arena of local self-government. But these new measures were not accompanied by any fundamental change in the structure of district administration, which remained 'paternalistic' and personalised. This was not only the result of an inability to comprehend the nature of the economic and political changes that had taken place in Bengal, but a corresponding short-sightedness in financial policy which hoped for a dramatic increase in government revenue without the accompanying infrastructural inputs. The result was that by 1905 Bengal was in the throes of a deep administrative crisis.

The British policy in Bengal also hoped that by widening the arena of government they would be able to draw in a large network of 'collaborators' who would be involved in the structures of official institutional politics. The expansion of local self-government projects was seen as part of this endeavour. But thanks to the political myopia of the officials, every effort was made to restrict access to these new bodies and control was firmly vested in the hands of District Officers. As a result, instead of widening the political arena, the Government of Bengal, at least in Midnapur, merely created unrepresentive self-perpetuating cliques. Till 1920, the colonial authorities had been completely unsuccessful in acquiring that legitimacy which had been their aim since Lord Ripon.

Moreover, British policy in Bengal was based on a static perception of the revolutionising effects of the Permanent Settlement which had created the zamindars - the 'natural leaders'. Midnapur, far from following Cornwallis' model, presented a complex picture of more than 3000 petty zamindars, the occasional large zamindar, and a body of tenure-holding ryots varying in size and influence. It was the growing

assertiveness of this last category, led by the prosperous jotedar intermediaries, that the government failed to recognise. The jotedars, along with many petty zamindars from whom they were not substantially differentiated, except in juridical terms, were the real power-holders in rural society through their control of rent (as distinct from fixed land revenue), credit and marketing operations. Moreover, they shared with the less-prosperous ryots a common antagonism vis à vis the bhagchasis.

The power of rural property increased in the first two decades of the century through the Mahishya caste movement. This movement inculcated a spirit of peasant pride in the large Mahishya population in Midnapur, and fostered an artificial notion of brotherhood tempered by caste and occupation. The political impact of the caste movement was profound. It glossed over the real class differences in the countryside and instead developed a vertical 'peasant' identity. Given the already prevailing structure of power in rural Midnapur, the caste movement consolidated the existing hold of the jotedars; it negated the immediate development of conscious class politics in Midnapur.

But thanks to the existing British policy, the political potential of the jotedars was not incorporated into the mainstream of institutional politics. Institutional politics still remained the prerogative of the small number of bhadrolok lawyers and other professionals in the urban enclaves. There the intellectual currents of nationalism were to find a small responsive audience, especially in the wake of the Swadeshi movement. But the inability of the Midnapur 'nationalists' to link their politics with the growing aspirations of the indigenous power structure was to spell doom for both the militant 'secret societies' and the constitutionalist agitation against the proposed partition of Midnapur district.

The Government of India Act of 1919 and the Bengal Village Self Government Act altered the parameters of politics in Midnapur. Thanks to the expansion of the electorate which gave the franchise to the 'well-to-do cultivators' and the removal of bureaucratic obstacles from the organs of local self-government, new openings were created for the enlargement of the political audience. This government initiative also corresponded

with the radical change of style of nationalist politics following the emergence of Gandhi. The Non Co-operation movement, coming in the wake of a severe economic dislocation, was the focal point for the emergence of various localised movements of dissidence against the Raj. In Midnapur, it witnessed the successful movement against Union Boards led by B.N.Sasmal which enabled Congress to gain an initial foothold among precisely that section which had been enfranchised in 1919. The movement in the Jungle Mahals, though directed against European interests, was of a more radical character and was at variance with the pattern of politics established by the Union Board agitation. But the important feature of 1921-2 was the fact that for the first time a firm connection had been made between the hitherto-elitist tradition of nationalist politics and the indigenous non-institutional rural politics.

Indeed, the fact that this new style of politics emerged in the course of the Non Co-operation movement would call into question those theories that have sought to link politicisation with government initiatives. In Midnapur, politicisation and the new pattern of political activity did not emerge automatically from the government reforms. The elections to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1920 (which Congress boycotted) clearly showed the limits of participation. The colonial government in Bengal, at this conjuncture, did not have the requisite base or the political imagination to enlarge the boundaries of political participation. In Midnapur, it was the local initiatives fostered by the Non Co-operation movement that altered and enlarged the political audience. These initiatives, in their ideological articulation, proceeded on the lines determined by the existing patterns of class relationship, but they corresponded to the new structural changes in political law introduced by the colonial authorities. Hence in 1922, Congress was able to intervene effectively in the new colonial structures because the political basis for doing so had been established during the Non Co-operation movement. The importance of dyarchy and the District and Local Boards between 1923 and 1930 lay in the fact that Congress decided to participate and give these political forms some credibility. But in 1930 when Congress opted out of participation the credibility of these bodies disappeared overnight. The importance of government structures did not lie independently within these structures, but in the subjective intervention within them by Congress. Indeed, by 1930, at

least in Midnapur, Congress had become the legitimate political authority; the Raj was incapable of political initiatives without its cooperation.

But the exact nature of Congress intervention within the structures of colonial rule was to determine the social character of nationalist politics in Midnapur well beyond the formal declaration of independence in 1947. B.N.Sasmal, who was the Congress's leading strategist in the period before Civil Disobedience, used the powers and the limited patronage of the District and Local Boards to establish the political hegemony of the Congress as an organisation. By effectively neutralising the countervailing powers of the official machinery and by utilising the powers of the Boards for organisational-political ends, he was successful in providing for Congress the necessary environment for the spread of nationalist politics. In this particular strategy, Sasmal and the Midnapur Congress were completely at variance with other nationalist politicians intervening in colonial structures whose style of politics did not constitute any departure from the pattern set by their non-party predecessors. Moreover, since participation had a distinctly political and organisational appendage to it, district politics were not predominantly governed by the 'patronage' syndrome. Hence the pattern of district politics as 'purely factional' or consisting of "interest-swopping, horse-trading and parlour diplomacy as rural politicians strove to capture points of executive power",[1] cannot be held to be true for Midnapur. 'Constitutional' politics in the district had definite social and ideological dimensions.

But there were limitations to the effectiveness of District and Local Boards as agencies of political mobilisation. Besides the significant fact that their resources were minimal, the more obvious fact was that the state was not controlled by the Congress. Since the livelihood of people in the district was controlled by forces and powers beyond the reach of district politicians, Congress had to play a definite oppositional role and postulate its own vision of society. This it did

1. D.A.Washbrook, The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency 1870-1920, Cambridge 1976, p 173.

by articulating the class interests of the broad range of tenure-holders or what Rajat Ray described as 'dominant village lineages' subjected to superior landlords.[2] This phenomenon gave the Midnapur Congress a definite ideological orientation separate from the dominant tendency within the BPCC, and nowhere was this more evident than in the particular stance taken by the district Congress towards the provisions in the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1928. Moreover, it was this definite orientation which prevented the Midnapur Congress from falling prey to the personalised factionalism of the Calcutta leadership. The only occasion, as we have seen, when Calcutta was able to successfully outwit the local leadership was in 1926, when district politics acquired a sudden communal dimension fostered from the outside.

This specific social base which the Midnapur Congress gradually acquired was put to the test during the Civil Disobedience movement which was initiated at a time of severe economic depression. During this movement, Congress was able to operate without the organisational constraints of 1921 and successfully to pose as the parallel political authority at a moment of outright confrontation. The streamlined organisation based on rural property successfully conducted a movement that displayed considerable militancy without correspondingly upsetting the prevailing pattern of class relationship in the countryside. To that extent, Midnapur did not deviate from 'the logic of Gandhian nationalism' which itself was a movement representing the interests of property under the ideological hegemony of indigenous capital. It was this characteristic that marked the Indian nationalist movement from other populist or millenarian currents, and that contributed to its inherent dynamism and the accompanying constraints in a situation of distorted capitalist development.

Since this thesis set out to examine the structure of local politics in Bengal, it is necessary at this stage to discuss the typicality or otherwise of the Midnapur experience. Historians who have examined this

2. Rajat Ray, 'Political Change in British India', IESHR, XIV, 4, 1977, p 508.

question are unanimous in their contention that Midnapur constituted an exception to the dominant trend in Bengali nationalist politics. To John Gallagher what was unique about Midnapur was the ability of the leadership to take up issues 'popular with the richer peasants'.[3] At the opposite end of the spectrum, Sumit Sarkar saw in Midnapur a form of radical peasant nationalism which threatened to upset both the British and the Congress applecarts.[4] In this thesis, we are in broad agreement with the conclusions of Gallagher.

The nationalist movement in Bengal was perennially handicapped by a permanent East-West divide. The Bengali Hindu bhadrolok, which constituted the driving force of the Congress was, drawn substantially from East Bengal where they constituted the bulk of zamindars and other non-productive intermediaries. Benefitting tremendously from the expansion of English education, they increasingly took to the professions in the 19th century and supplemented their earned incomes with extractions from land. A significant proportion of them were absentee too, a factor which did not aid social relationships in a part of Bengal where the overwhelming mass of the cultivators were Muslim. The overtly Hindu idiom of the Swadeshi movement widened the gulf between the two communities and, aided by the imperial power, Muslims became the counter-weight to the Congress in Bengal. Though there was a momentary alliance between the two communities during the Non Co-operation and Khilafat movements, the old ruptures showed up again during the administration of dyarchy. Now the numerical dominance of the Muslims was compounded by their growing importance in the Legislative Council and the District Boards. The Congress leadership could not have been unaware of these developments, but thanks to the social composition of its membership in East Bengal who felt threatened by a dual British-Muslim onslaught, it was unable to relate to the newly-enfranchised Muslims in East Bengal. Instead, the Bengal Congress, thanks in no small measure to the tense communal situation, increasingly took on the paradoxical role as the defender of the status-quo. During the debates on the Bengal Tenancy Act, it

3. John Gallagher, 'Congress in Decline: Bengal 1930-39', in Gallagher, Johnson, Seal, ed, Locality, Province and Nation, Cambridge 1973, p 294.
4. Sumit Sarkar, 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism: Civil Disobedience and the Gandhi-Irwin Pact', Indian Historical Review, III, 1, 1976.

progressively projected itself as the champion of the zamindars, and in the 'rotten borough' of the Calcutta Corporation refused to increase the quota of Muslim recruitment. Not surprisingly, Congress found itself increasingly in the wilderness and ineffective during the Civil Disobedience movement, and the sharp rise in terrorism in East Bengal during the 1930s can be partially ascribed to the growing bhadrolok desperation in the face of political isolation and hostility. After the Communal Award of 1933, the Congress withdrew more and more into its elitist shell notwithstanding the pseudo-radical rhetoric of Subhas Bose. It was only the second partition of Bengal in 1947 that rescued it from its role of a permanent and ineffective opposition.

Clearly, the course of pre-independence Bengali Congress politics raises some doubts regarding the historians' description of the bhadrolok as 'traditional intellectuals'[5] and 'socially autonomous'.[6] No doubt there were individuals of bhadrolok origin who espoused radical causes, but the bhadrolok as a group were certainly too enmeshed in their immediate social situation to serve as progressive forces in the nationalist movement in Bengal. More than ever before, they were blinkered to the consequences of the prevailing disease of communalism. As a result they conducted themselves in a style which the development of politics had rendered obsolete.

Yet politics in Midnapur did not fall into the pattern set by the rival factions of the Bengal Congress. The peculiarities of the landholding pattern in the district, especially the absence of multiple categories of intermediaries, negated the development of any substantial middle class dependant on absentee rent as a supplement to professional income. Given the relative simplicity of landholding and the general absence of absentee landlordism, the contours of rural power were clearly established. This was supplemented by the absence of communal divisions in the countryside and, indeed, the development of an all-round peasant brotherhood through the aegis of the Mahishya caste movement. The assertiveness of the tenure-holding ryots and jotedars

5. Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-8, Delhi 1973, pp 513-4.
6. Rajat Ray, op.cit, p 496.

also prevented the emergence of the 'high landlordism' that characterised many districts in East Bengal.[7] Consequently, Congress, in its political intervention, based itself on the prevailing pattern of rural domination and articulated the aspirations of that section against the colonial state and other class forms of nationalist politics. Whereas in other parts of Bengal,Congress allied itself to classes on the defensive, in Midnapur it was able to project the aspirations of sections of society that not only wielded effective rural power, but had also been brought into the forefront of institutional politics by the Government of India Act of 1919. In a sense, the pattern of Congress politics in Midnapur corresponded to those established by the organisation in the Andhra Delta and parts of Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat.[8] In East Bengal, the style and dynamism of the Midnapur experience was effectively captured by the Krishak Praja Party and the Muslim League, which directed it towards Pakistan.

Modern historiography has increasingly questioned the 'populist' perceptions of the 'real India' comprising static and non-antagonistic village communities.[9] The British conquest led to a process of combined and uneven development of capitalism. The growing commercialisation of agriculture in various parts of India accentuated the process of differentiation of the peasantry. This process took concrete shape in the late-19th and early-20th centuries leading to the emergence of what historians have variously perceived as 'rich peasants' or 'rural elite' tied to the world market.[10] In the rice-exporting economy of Midnapur,

7. K.K.Sengupta, Pabna Disturbances and the Politics of Rent 1873-85, Delhi 1974, pp 95-147.
8. Articles by D.A.Low, Brian Stoddart, David Hardiman and G.Pandey, in D.A.Low, ed, Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917-47, London 1977.
9. For a recent critique see T.J.Byres, 'Of Neo-Populist Pipe-Dreams: Daedalus in the Third World and the Myth of Urban Bias', Journal of Peasant Studies, VI, 2, 1979.
10. N.Charlesworth, 'Rich Peasants and Poor Peasants in Late Nineteenth Century Maharashtra', and D.A.Washbrook, 'Economic Development and Social Stratification in Rural Madras', in C.Dewey and A.G.Hopkins, ed, The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India, London 1978. Jairus Banaji, 'Capitalist Domination and the Small Peasantry: Deccan Districts in the Late Nineteenth Century', in Banaji, Patnaik, et al, Studies in the Development of Capitalism in India, Lahore 1978.

this phenomenon was associated with the jotedars producing for the market on the backs of petty commodity producers. In other words, as we have noted, rural society was divided into distinct class categories consisting of objectively antagonistic groups viz. zamindars, jotedars, ryots, bhagchasis/bargadars and agricultural workers. We have also observed that the nature of landholdings in Midnapur, especially the preponderance of petty zamindars, determined why the bulk of that group was closely associated with the jotedars. But we have also noted that in spite of objective class contradictions the jotedars and the ryots were united in political action under the unifying banner of the legal category 'tenure-holders'. Midnapur, we have therefore concluded, did not experience any class struggle in spite of the objective economic basis for such a conflict.

The ties of caste and the existence of a strong sense of caste-consciousness were partly responsible for this. Anthropologists have noted the overwhelming influence of kinship ties or biraderi among the 'middle peasants', especially as such ties offer the protection and security of kinship combinations against 'deviant' landlords.[11] In Bengal, where law constituted an important force in the regulation of social relationships, the legal unity fostered on jotedars and ryots offered such a protection to the latter in their dealings with antagonistic classes viz. zamindars and bhagchasis. Moreover, the Mahishya caste movement was never an exclusive movement; its adherents strove to gain recognition for themselves as a clean peasant caste and always retained a strong bias towards occupational peasant solidarity as, we may note, in the support given to the Namasudras. These factors contributed to obliterating real class differences and projecting an united front of tenure-holders based on existing patterns of class hierarchy. These ties were again reinforced by the varying degrees of economic dependence of the ryots on jotedars.

Moreover, the ryots occupied a position in rural society which might be termed as one of 'contradictory class locations'.[12] As rent payers,

11. Hamza Alavi, 'Peasant Classes and Primordial Loyalties', Journal of Peasant Studies, I, 1, 1974, pp 55-8.
12. I have borrowed the term from Erik Olin Wright, 'Class Boundaries in Advanced Capitalist Societies', New Left Review, 98, 1976, pp 3-41.

they occupied a contradictory location with their superior landlord; as occasional minor sub-landlords, their interests conflicted with the bhagchasis; as employers of labour, they came into conflict with bhagchasis and landless labour; and as receivers of credit and marketers of grain they felt the weight of economic dependence on jotedars. Hence, given their contradictory class location, their political alliance with the jotedars was by no means inevitable except insofar as they had common antagonisms. In the final analysis, their political allegiances were determined by the actualities of the political process.

The nationalist movement in India sought to project the vision of a 'national unity' against imperialism. In 1920 Gandhi had referred to Congress as a "national organisation providing a platform for all parties to appeal to the Nation".[13] This particular 'umbrella' conception of the Congress as a neutral body mediating between divergent interests in indigenous society was an useful mechanism for concealing the reality of the movement. In the process of mass mobilisation Congress chose precisely those issues that would not antagonise any particular group and keep this illusory unity intact. In Midnapur for example, the Congress leadership chose the key issues of Union Board taxation and non-payment of the unpopular chaukidari tax in their moments of confrontation with the British. Both these issues concerned all classes in rural society and were therefore perfect mechanisms for concealing other antagonisms. Congress was not prepared to unleash, on a national scale, social forces that would endanger the basic class structure of society. Thus in 1922, after 'the foetid smell of violence'[14] in Chauri Chaura, Gandhi called off the Non Co-operation movement. The Bardoli resolution advised "Congress workers and organisations to inform the peasants that withholding of rent payments is contrary to the Congress resolutions and injurious to the best interests of the country".[15]

13. Quoted in Jairus Banaji, 'The Comintern and Indian Nationalism', International, III, 4, 1977, p 31.
14. Ibid, p 29.
15. Quoted in B.B.Chaudhury, 'Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar 1919-39', in A.R.Desai, ed, Peasant Struggles in India, Oxford 1979, p 342.

Nehru, according to a sympathetic biographer, knew that the no-rent campaign in Uttar Pradesh was "part of the class war; but he preferred to project it as an aspect of the struggle against the British".[16] And in 1938, Vallabbhai Patel could not have been more explicit:

> Comrade Lenin was not born in this country and we do not want a Lenin here. We want Gandhi and Ramachandra. Those who preach class hatred are enemies of the country.[17]

Even the radicals seemed to agree with Patel. In 1939, P.C.Joshi, the General Secretary of the Communist Party told Kisan Sabha activists:

> The major class division is between imperialism and the Indian people, the greatest class struggle is our national struggle, the main organ of our struggle is the National Congress. Any course that takes the kisan away from this straight course separates him from the people.[18]

Moreover, the radicals were further handicapped by their acceptance of the two-stage theory of social change which permitted confrontation if directed against 'semi-feudal landlordism' only.[19] When Congress permitted the use of radical tactics in the politics of confrontation, these tactics were kept sectional and directed solely against government or European interests. In Midnapur, as we have noted, confrontation between the Santhals and the Midnapur Zamindari Company was encouraged solely because the latter was European-controlled. During the Civil Disobedience movement again, a no-rent campaign was initiated by Congress activists in only those areas held by the European company. Thus, the mechanics of political mobilisation by Congress negated the prospects of any upheaval within society. Naturally this meant that structures of indigenous class domination were reinforced and social change postponed for a later date. Under these circumstances, given the reality of the political process, it is hardly surprising that the ryots in Midnapur accomodated themselves to the dominant political current led by the effective wielders of rural power - the jotedars. It is also not surprising to note that it was the jotedars who benefited most from the

16. S.Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Vol 1, London 1975, p 208.
17. Quoted in B.B.Chaudhuri, op.cit, p 366.
18. P.C.Joshi, 'Kisan Movement', National Front, 2 April 1939. (I am grateful to Shri Prakash for this reference).
19. The tebhaga movement was a departure from the logic of the CPI's agrarian strategy.

anti-zamindari legislation after independence.

Besides the exigencies of political conjuncture, a factor that was of paramount importance in deciding the alignment of ryots was their attachment to property. We have seen this highlighted during the tenant struggles of 1908-12 and 1924-28, when ryots were vociferous in their protests against any incursions on their rights and privileges. This phenomenon, stemming from the appearance or the retention of 'the external attributes of independent producers',[20] made them lean towards conservative political currents. Indeed, the record of radical agrarian movements in Bengal has shown that though individual 'middle peasants' have occasionally sided with the underdogs, as a class they have either aligned themselves with the forces of reaction or remained passive.[21] This factor has compelled the Marxist left, eager to win their support, to abandon any notions of a revolutionary agrarian programme, and instead to concentrate on piecemeal reforms such as government subsidy of agricultural inputs. As Hobsbawm pointed out accurately: "The difficulty encountered by Indian communists in their peasant work today is that they can effectively appeal to some but not all rural strata, and in appealing to some, automatically tend to antagonise others".[22] This dilemma continues to haunt all movements for radical change in India.

The national movement, this thesis has argued, was therefore not a mere opportunistic 'ramshackle coalition' or a patching together of various expressions of dissidence. It was an assertive movement based on the existing patterns of indigenous class domination on the basis of property. Those historians searching for a progressive or indeed revolutionary current among lathi-waving peasants in Midnapur, need only consider Zinoviev's warning in 1922: "Do not paint nationalism Red".[23]

20. E.Preobrazhensky. Quoted in Jairus Banaji, 'Modes of Production in a Materialist Conception of History', Capital and Class, 3, Autumn 1977, p 35.
21. Sunil Sen, Agrarian Struggles in Bengal, Delhi 1972. K.Sarkar, 'Kakdwip Tebhaga Movement', in A.R.Desai, ed, op.cit, pp 469-85. Samar Sen, ed, Naxalbari And After, Vol 2, Calcutta 1978, pp 203-26.
22. Quoted in E.Hobsbawm, 'Some Reflections on 'The Break-up of Britain'', New Left Review, 105, 1977, p 23.

22. E. HOBSBAWM, 'PEASANTS AND POLITICS', JOURNAL OF PEASANT STUDIES, I, 1, 1974, pp 18-19.

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